

CINEACTION

HORROR



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FRONT COVER

Publicity still from *Monkey Shines*

BACK COVER

Publicity still from *The Day After*

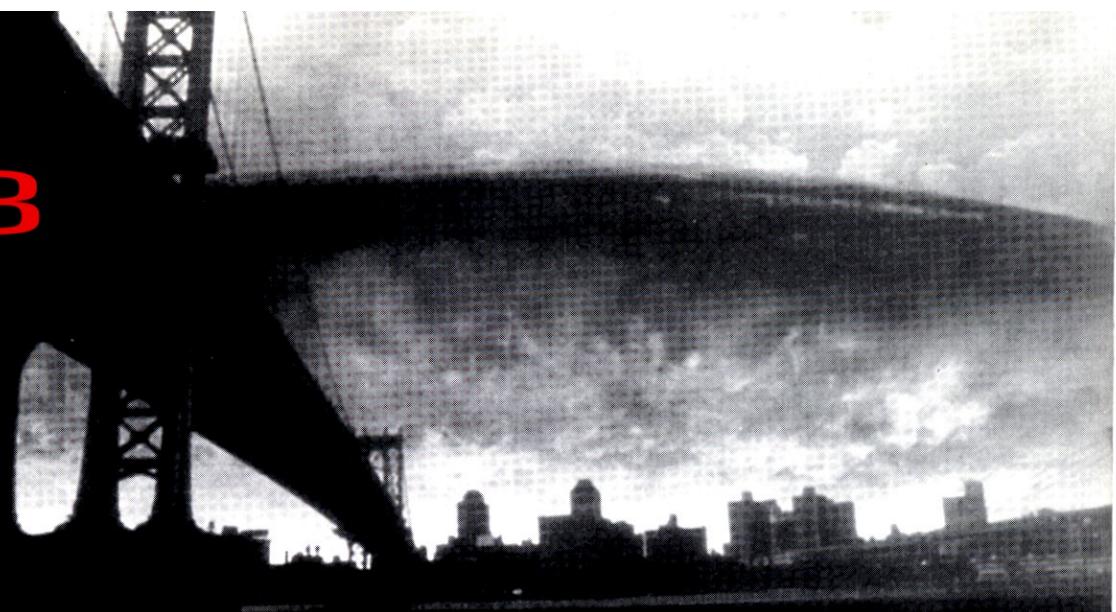


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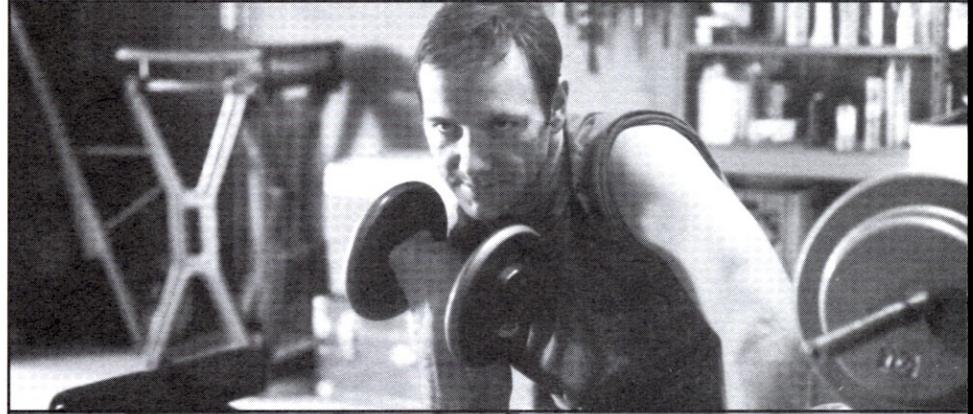
IN THE 24th HONG KONG

INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

by Shelly Kraicer



HORROR AND APOCALYPSE



Movie audiences, and critics, are enthralled with apocalypse—the images and themes of “the end of the world as we know it”, as one of this issue’s writers puts it. Several articles examine the enduring significance of this cinematic, social, psychological and philosophical attraction.

Horror films offer some of the most compelling imaginings of our apocalyptic end; they remain one of the most popular of contemporary genres. Critics have found them particularly fascinating and, in this issue, two articles look closely at films by George Romero, one of the most important, and apocalyptic, American horror filmmakers.

Other articles collected here trace the fate of heroism in recent American films and survey new films at recent film festivals in Hong Kong and Toronto. Our next issue will also include more detailed reviews and interviews from the Toronto International Film Festival.

Scott Forsyth

by Diane Sippl

Tomorrow Is My Birthday

Placing Apocalypse in Millennial Cinema

It is only too easy to conceive that a bomb that could destroy all trace of places as we know them... could also destroy all feelings as we know them, so irretrievably and so happily are recognition, memory, history, valor, love, all the instincts of poetry and praise, worship and endeavor, bound up in place. From the dawn of man's imagination, place has enshrined the spirit; as soon as man stopped wandering and stood still and looked about him, he found a god in that place; and from then on, that was where the god abided and spoke from, if ever he spoke.¹

Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction," in *The Eye of the Story*

Good friends, let's to the fields—I have a fever.
After a little walk, and by your pardon,
I think I'll sleep. There is no sweeter thing,
Nor fate more blessed than to sleep. Here, world,
I pass you like an orange to a child.
I can no more with you. Do what you will...

Edgar Lee Masters, "Tomorrow Is My Birthday,"
chosen by his loved ones for the epitaph of his tomb

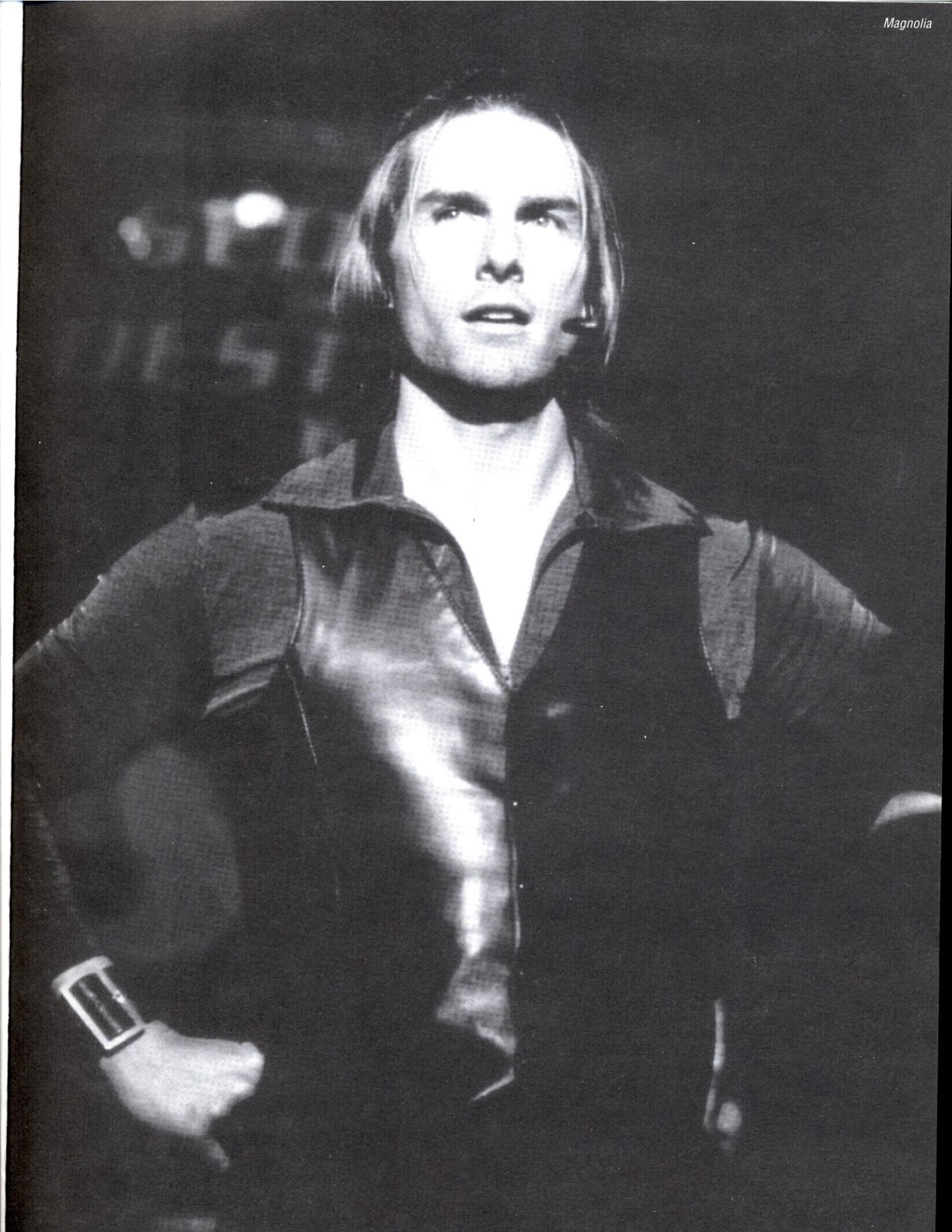
In Spoon River, where all are sleeping on the same hill of a *fin de siècle* cemetery, the town's buried inhabitants murmur their own epitaphs, "discovering and confessing... the secret steps that stumbled them to failure or raised them to illusionary triumphs while alive... as if the darkness of the grave granted them revelatory eyes for a recognition of their own souls."² The cinema, young then, was another dark cavern, a grotto with a window to a "music of light," to "sculpture in motion," "architecture in time."³ In a place that housed a spirit larger than life, shadows danced between the eye and the screen, compelling wonder and awe.

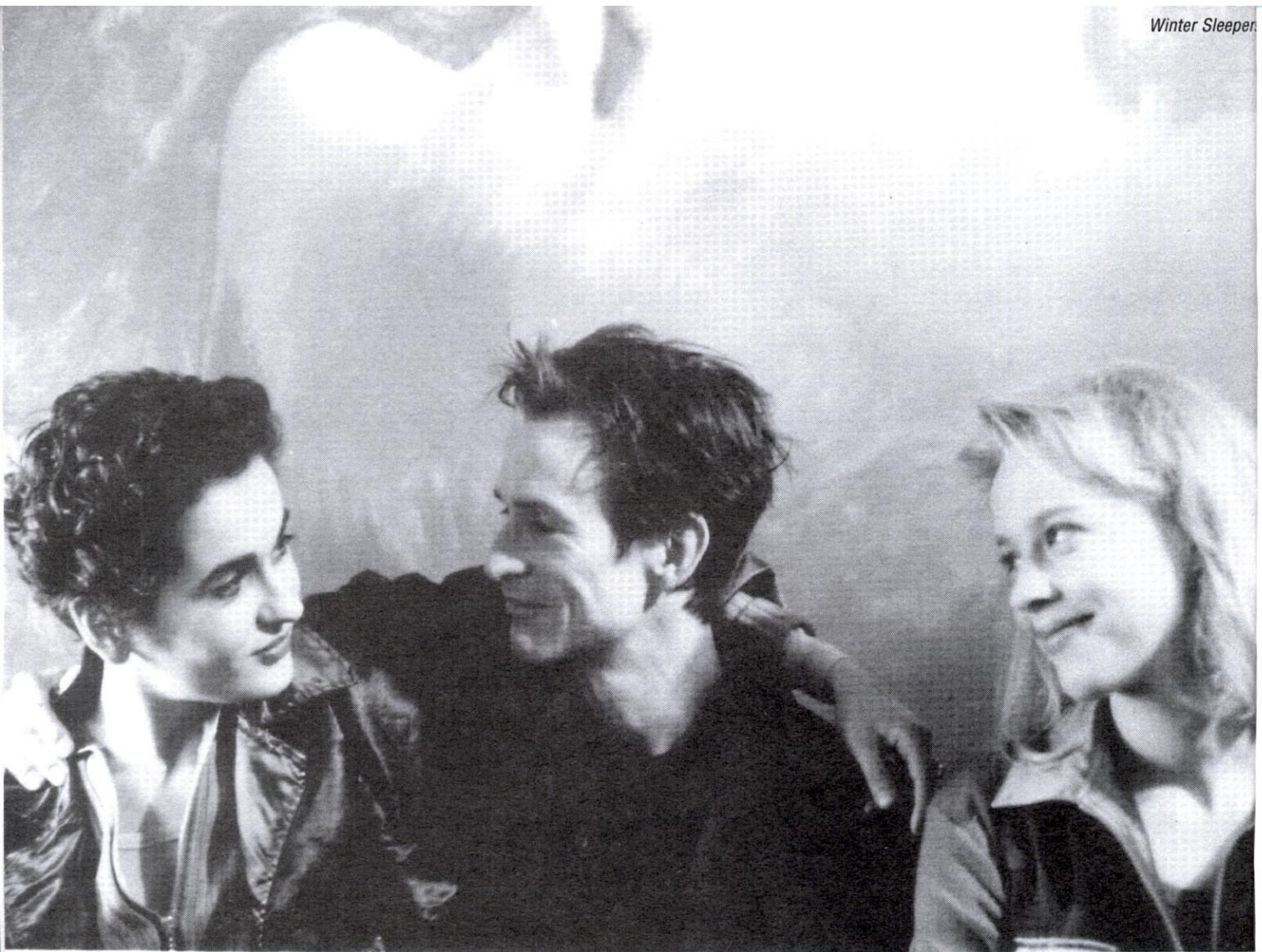
When John C. Rice fawned over May Irwin in the first screen kiss, the flirtatious snuggling and chatting foreplay far exceeding the peck on the lips and all transpiring inside of a minute, the whole exchange was perceived as a "process of delicious even

1 Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction," in *The Eye of the Story*, Vintage Books, New York, 1977, pp. 122-3.

2 May Swenson, "Introduction," in Edgar Lee Masters, *Spoon River Anthology*, Macmillan Publishing Co., New York, 1962, p. 5

3 The first phrase has been noted by Abel Gance and Otar Ioseliani, the second by Vachel Lindsay, and the third by Andrei Tarkovsky, Andrei Konchalovsky, and Akira Kurosawa.





tuation."⁴ In 1896 *The Kiss*, for Thomas Edison's Vitascope, irreversibly shattered our perception of the concrete and its relation to the imaginary. The "persisting, adhesive osculation"⁵ of "prolonged pasturing on each other's lips... magnified to Gargantuan proportions"⁶ and generally played three times consecutively was a beastly outrage to some, and to others, "the world's first educational motion picture."⁷ Soon it would be identified as a "jeweled dramatic moment... perpetuated and disseminated for the delectation of the multitudes in the hinterland."⁸ In any case the close-up of the kiss on the screen, with its violations of everyday life's time and space, propriety and scale, in a pre-filmic era when no cinematic perception was as yet programmed, was cataclysmic.⁹ A private urge was now a public affair—a quiet exchange, a loud taboo. What once had been left to fantasy became real, yet somehow bigger than life and so once again fantasy. This was the paradox of cinema: the intimacy of shared spectacle.

The end of time as we knew it and the end of our patience with static space, the cinema mobilized a strange apocalypse. It set all that was personal on a collision course with what had been thought of as social. Put another way, in this loss of self was born a bond—potential, tenuous and fragile—with any other devastated spirit, and this bond was as interior as it

was interactive. In that shared dark place, the poetry of the cinema might speak "doomsday accounts of the soul."¹⁰ And who doubted that the cinema, the lightning rod of the century, might illuminate that apocalypse as the ground of birth?

Today, weary as we may be with a proliferation of moving images and millennial angst to boot, our cinema is ever more our god, a god of sleep and dreams—sleep in the face of hunger and the night, and dreams to mitigate our sleep. Here I present the labors of five pivotal artists who inhabit the edge between defeat and prayer. Doom and death loom large in their films, specters of apocalypse as human as they are divine. Filling our screens in the year 2000, I see them as the ghosts of a century of cinema swinging on a hinge of hope, one that is more a question than a claim, that opens to curiosity from consternation, and courage from dismay. What I am suggesting is that, compelling and awesome as this handful of films can be, they have just as pronouncedly left spectators and critics alike at a loss. Our most bountiful images can breed disdain, and I am stirred by this predicament to look for whatever "common ground" of viewing can be possible as a place of rebirth.

For this reason I turn to the topic of "place" and how we are connected to it between the feeling, thinking body and

the sensations of the screen. How does the tangible raw material of a specific place become the physical texture of the space we perceive on the screen, and hence the source of its ethos? "Location is the ground conductor of all the currents of emotion and belief and moral conviction that charge out from a story in its course. These charges need the warm, hard earth underfoot, the light and lift of air, the stir and play of mood, the softening bath of atmosphere," Welty tells us, and if what we should experience feels strange, life itself is strange, and our cinema can hardly make it more so, but only "more believably, more inevitably so."¹¹ *Rollingman*, *Magnolia*, *Winter Sleepers*, *Angels of the Universe*, and *Beau Travail* are foreboding films, and are often felt to be as perturbing as they are confounding. And at the same time, Mike Sakamoto, Paul Thomas Anderson, Tom Tykwer, Fridrik Thor Fridriksson, and Claire Denis, respectively, convey an unforgettable reverence for place. If the cinema invites us to train our eyes and concentrate our focus, then it does so by defining and creating the beckoning "reality" of a location. These *auteurs* show us that to trace a locale, a milieu, a context and a situation within it, is also to frame our perspective, even our sensibility. Not only that, it is to recognize the mystery of what is unseen, so that, paradoxically, to discover that mystery is not a matter of habit or inscription, but of vision. For quite possibly it is the case that the works I present here require not so much keen eyes as an open heart. "Whatever our place, it has been visited by the stranger, it will never be new again. It is only the vision that can be new; but that is enough."¹²

We might think of an apocalypse as an ominous, prophetic revelation of an imminent, ultimate, cosmic cataclysm that descends in a grandiose and climactic manner in which the reign of evil is doomed and a final judgment raises the righteous to life. I would like to define apocalypse as simply as this: the end of the world as we know it. If *The Kiss* signaled an apocalypse of the social relations of personal expression and of early communications media, then it was both indisputable as a physical presence and irreversible at a moment in time. In subsequent films materiality and temporality would come together in the choice of place, which itself would become inseparable from its "ethos"—the living and breathing, or dying and haunting, "spirit" of a people, not unlike the smell of "rot" in Denmark, or New York City, in *Hamlet 2000*.¹³ What is operative is devastation and loss, and be it destruction, death, even suicide, for me it is perhaps the irretrievability that makes it apocalyptic—the personal and social incapacity to regain what has been lost, even if afforded the ground for beginning again. In that ground a place becomes a depot of exterior tangibles and interior registers, a way station of objectivities and subjectivities, where we find reservoirs of fear and denial but also longing and love. A film is a place for testing experience, and apocalyptic cinema is the signature of that process. An enhanced sensitivity to place and the pending deterioration of its ethos can transform our vision. While the cinema itself feeds our assumptions regarding what we see, our "stored visual hypotheses" of the world, a film that nourishes a new vision—a world both artist and spectator create—can teach us to approach any place, on or off the screen, with cautious veneration, owing to its potential ambiance, its dynamic life, or its latent spirit.

Prologue: Keep It Rolling...

The test of any good theory is the amount of space it allows for the participation of ideas, examples, and insights of others, how it can be used as a possible shape for experience rather than a restrictive enclosure. Perhaps the true model for an aesthetic theory should not be a new terminology or a visual pattern, but a building, *created as a possible place*, with potential uses and pleasures, but incomplete if no one can enter, occupy, and contribute to the realization of the inside. (italics mine)¹⁴

Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films*

In the twilit theater, lulled with music's emotional and motion rhythms, we see our day-dream wishes ethereally materialized before us at the screen's window, which opens on the land of heart's desire. Without painstaking thought or effort it comes and rolls on and on and on. The Motion Picture is the Prayer Wheel of the Wish.¹⁵

Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights* (1926)

In *The World in a Frame*, Leo Braudy explores how cinema can "embody some theme that is deeply rooted in the emotions of its audience and at the same time deliver as it were a disquisition on its own artistic nature and why such themes are so suited to it."¹⁶ *Rollingman* is exemplary in demonstrating this proposition as it applies to each of the apocalyptic expressions I am probing here. Like Braudy, Mike Sakamoto is fascinated by the frame and the extent to which it contains and controls the world inside it. As we apply this concern we ask, is the apocalyptic film a place we can enter and exit freely, even if self-consciously, or a place that compels us within its walls and subserves us under the roof of its all-encompassing space?

As we shall see, the recurring vitality of the following films rests in the tension between their "open" and "closed" worlds and their parallel or non-parallel open or closed aesthetics. *Rollingman* houses a world. A diminutive version of the larger and longer works in the discussion to follow, *Rollingman* serves as a prototype because, in its elemental approach to cinema, it shows us what Braudy's theoretical "place" might be like, both in the throes of the apocalyptic moment and in

4 Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights*, Simon and Schuster, Inc., New York, p. 260.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 257.

6 *The Chap Book*, Herbert S. Stone, Publisher, Chicago, June 15, 1896.

7 Ramsaye, p. 258.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Multiplicity of time and space on the screen was yet to come in this pre-editing stage of filmmaking with a static camera.

10 A poem by Ibsen reads, What is Life? A fighting

Of heart and mind with trolls.
Poetry? That means writing
Doomsday accounts of the Soul.

11 Welty, p. 128.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

13 An adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, set in New York, 2000, by Michael Almereyda, released this year, a film that certainly fits the scope of the present discussion.

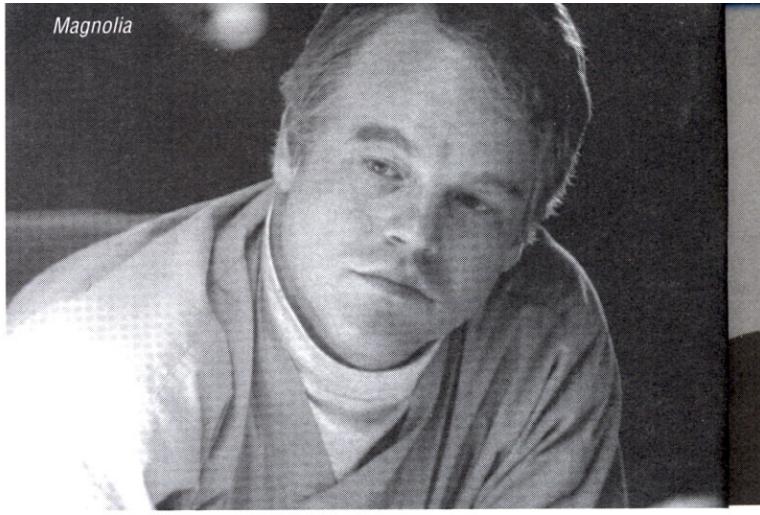
14 Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films*, Doubleday, Garden City, New York, 1977.

15 Ramsay, p. lxx.

16 Braudy, p. 8



Magnolia



the glimmer of rebirth. Sakamoto shows us how films themselves can serve as theories of art and of life.

Like the first experiments with cinema, *Rollingman* is part science and part art, using the frame for both clinical knowledge and primeval magic. With his own rapt attention to surfaces and movement, Rollingman demonstrates a sensitivity to the tactile reality that surrounds him, and from this poignant physicality grows a spirit—a zest for life so enigmatic and yet so fundamental that it is non-referentially messianic.

The film hits a raw nerve, and painfully, but not in the usual way. A long, static opening shot of Rollingman at home forces us to look about. The eerie, slightly tilted framing of his kitchen and the bleak lighting on the black and white stock hollow out the image as the deadening silence accentuates Rollingman's clumping footsteps. Then the room is saturated with the hyper-drone of his microwave vibrating off the formica countertops. The table is conventionally set for one; a paper napkin and plastic utensils line the spot where he will set his dinner box. Decorating his table is the artificial tree bought at Pavillion's after-Christmas sale, and when it sings "Up on the Housetop" and jiggles to and fro, the animation is all too much for him. Rollingman crawls under the table. His apocalypse is one of detachment, dejection, and inertia. His living room an emotional void with its lampshade askew, Rollingman plops before the TV screen and tunes in to the vital forces of life—the penis, the breast, and the communal dance. But these defy the storehouse of cinematic images as we know them. The penis belongs to an infant, and the close-up is on his circumcision; while the audience averts their eyes, groans, and shudders, Rollingman gazes with no affect at this educational film, as if its Spanish language divorces him from its excruciating images. The squeezed breast he sees is offering milk, and Rollingman gropes for his own analogous appendage, as if he had one. The Chézzam party he looks at next features dancers dressed up in theme costumes who are actually unemployed actors and has-been celebrities. But looking at Rollingman, curled up in his strangely fetal position, each of these frames-within-a-frame strikes us as his initiation into one of the *ur*-forms of life. And though Rollingman's crisis-ridden body may be yearning for sensation, he appears to be not yet ready or able to step out: with all the physicality in his world, he cannot yet register the crack in his shell.

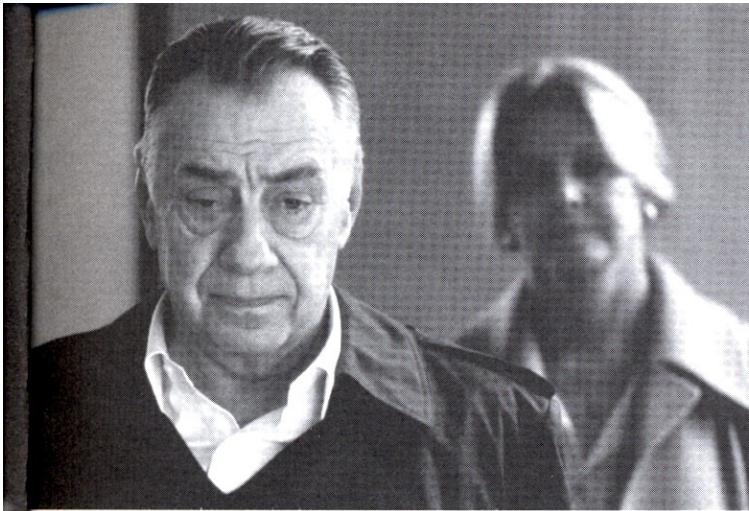
While there may be a deep well of symbolic meanings offered here, the director does not allow us to go fishing in

that well. Sakamoto trades the symbolic method of allegorical storytelling for the mode of *The Kiss*: a concrete representation that begs an imaginary participation, never proffering concept over feeling. Rollingman relates to the screen like the novice spectator a century ago. The penis he sees isn't Power—it cries; the breast on his screen isn't Titillation—it feeds. Rollingman probes the tactile pictures he sees on his TV by aligning his posture on the couch with the positions of the screen's inhabitants; with this rather "plastic" identification as he proceeds to touch the corresponding regions of his own body, he intuitively searches for a life-line, and we feel the need to tilt our heads with his as if to be "in-synch."

But it would be difficult for us to take up his position when, after the interruption of a black screen, we find him rolling like a log up and down his kitchen floor. Likewise, it is impossible here to convey the spectator's reaction when in the next shot he is seen rolling like a barrel, arms curled up over his chest, down his driveway. When he carefully rounds the curve onto the sidewalk, we see that he is "on his way"—from inside to outside, if nowhere else. We perceive this as a point of no return because for the first time in the film, the camera itself has moved. We might say the film pivots at this moment from a "closed" to an "open" style as Rollingman turns to the flow of life.

The camera tracks him down neighborhood sidewalks, city pavement, and railroad lines through a pastoral landscape, its lengthy shot-sequences with fixed angles requiring us to notice the details of life which, with little symbolic weight, evoke a host of feelings. Rollingman passes and crosses other rollingmen: a child on a bike, a man pushing a shopping cart, a wheelchair rider. The exchange of looks—not with Rollingman, who is busy rolling, but between us and those who look on, flabbergasted, as we look at them, our jaws long since dropped—leaves us quite beside ourselves. As if to ratify Rollingman's idiomatic behavior, as he enters the local dumpsite, an earthy score finally seeps its way into the film, a latent rolling refrain from the synthesizer of Riz Ortolani that scrolls in steady pace and tone like a wordless ballad, following the rotation of Rollingman's body past the pile-up of used objects, down the byways of layered lives. By now our own gaping, grinning guffaws have filled our eyes with a placid smile.

Rollingman emanates the magic of continuity in a moment of radical departure. While there is no way to predict, contain, or explain his course, by his very movement the man propels our thoughts—as does that other "rolling-



man," the filmmaker, who, at 24 frames per second, re-situates our relation to the cinema; for we, too, have been perched alone in the dark before a screen, and Rollingman spurs us in a new direction. His lowly behavior, ranging from morose to celebratory, demonstrates how objects can create a world and how technique can become meaning. There is something humbling about being so low to the ground as to be in contact with it at every turn, and then again there is something quite elevating about the same experience—"getting down" to be "on a roll" soon feels uplifting to watch.

When the rolling finally comes to rest, the camera holds us in a painterly tableau of a man, a tree, a hill. The return to stasis and the opportunity to ponder the moving image in retrospect, in the imagination, let us to discover how curiously, patiently, avidly we are willing to follow it, to peruse it, simply to see where and how it goes. The film thereby opens a space for us to consider what it means "to roll"—to make one's way through a place, a world, distinctively, creatively, painstakingly, with discipline, skill, and perseverance. In so doing, Rollingman encounters amazement, wonder, encouragement. But more important, we ask, what does he stimulate, model, and inspire?

Can we imagine the prone pirouetting of our own arm-guarded bodies as a resurrection from devastation, or even an impetus to connection? If "all illusions are potential ways of ordering reality,"¹⁷ then on the screen we do not look for a real world, but a believable, plausible, desirable one. Because the image in a film moves, it exists in time and marks its place against continuity as well as contiguity. Place, then, gives rise to "contingencies of relationships, the adventitious quality of associations" that are generally thought to be created by montage. Rollingman's movement through the spaces outside his door endorses them with the coherency and integrity of a place whose ethos he helps to create. Likewise, he brings to that ethos an esoteric charisma that is difficult to forget. If art can offer us new continuities and new connections, in itself and within ourselves, Rollingman is a Prayer Wheel, and he shows us how wishes take their place.

"The Regret that You Make and the Something You Take and the Blah, Blah, Blah..."

I don't know where to put things, you know? I really do have love to give. I just don't know where to put it.

Quiz Kid Donnie Smith, *Magnolia*



I know that I might sound ridiculous, like this is the scene in the movie where the guy's trying to get a hold of the long-lost son, you know, but this is that scene. This is that scene. And I think they have those scenes in movies because they're true, you know, because they really happen.... See, this is the scene in the movie where you help me out.

Nurse Phil Parma, *Magnolia*

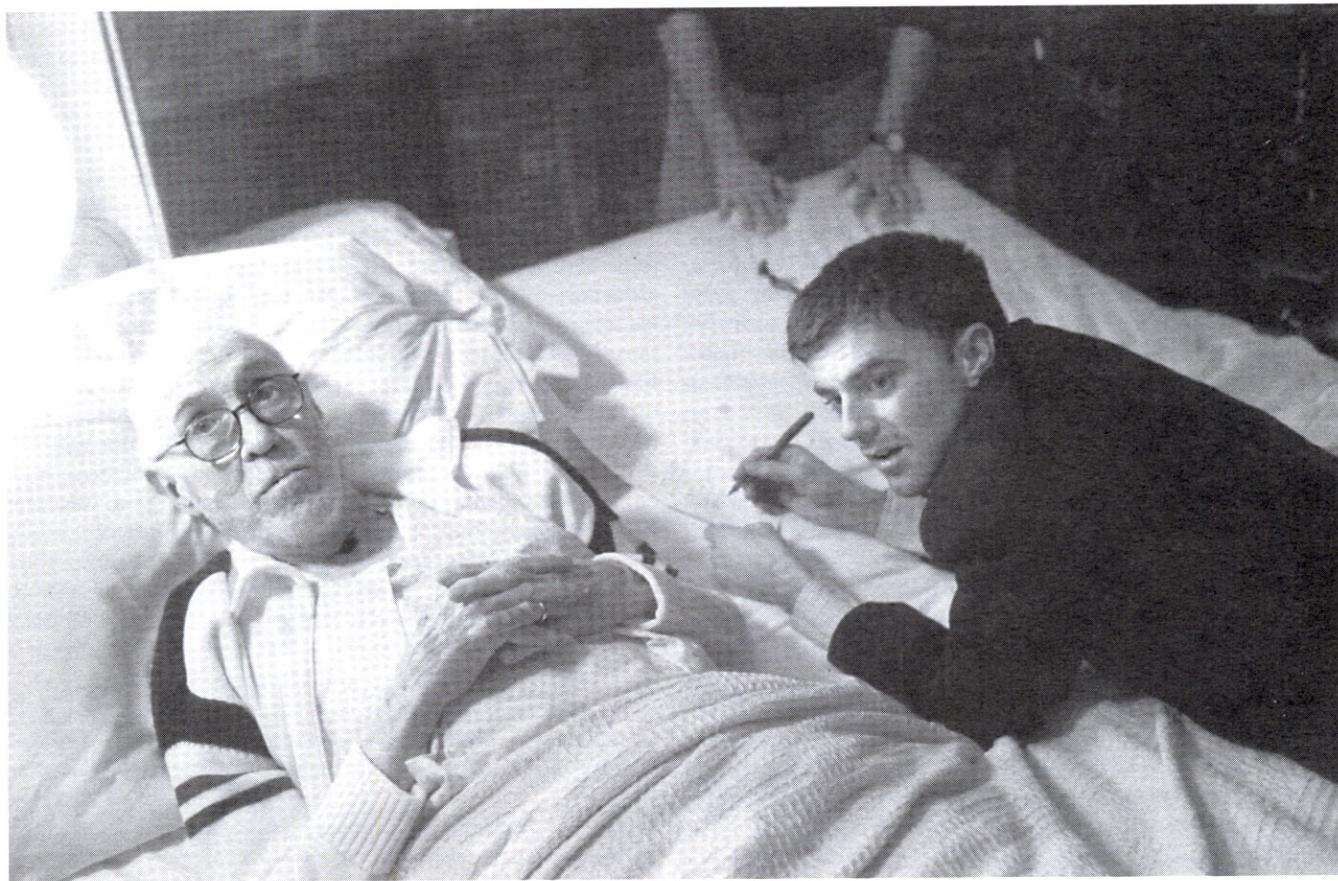
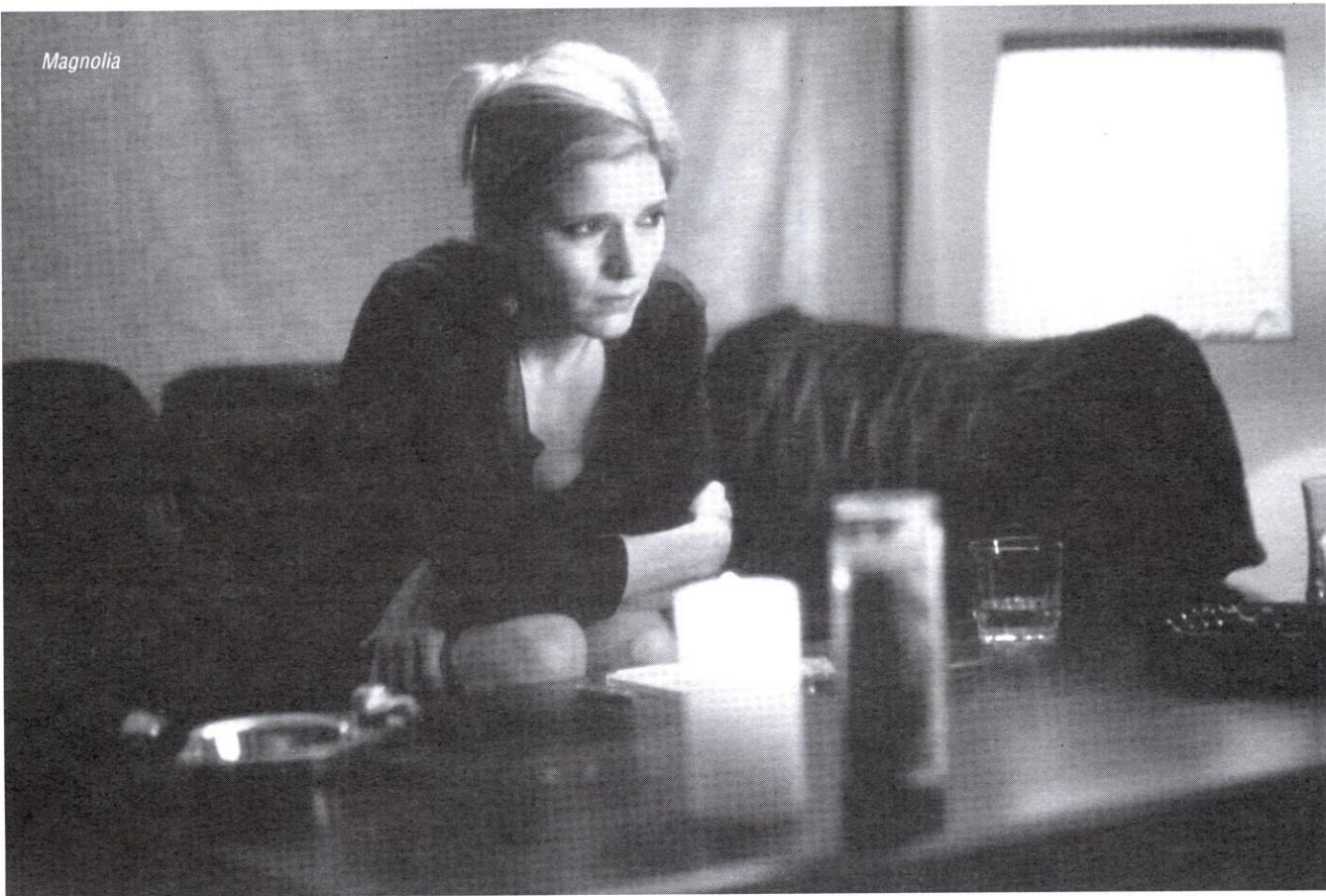
*Magnolia*¹⁸ is perhaps the most brazenly apocalyptic film of the millennial moment, both literally and figuratively.¹⁹ Pedagogical in its purpose and its method to the extent that it has garnered some reservation in its reception, the film delivers its recurrent themes in bold relief: "A little moral story, I say—love, love, love"; "And the Book says we may be through with the past, but the past is not through with us"; "You should know *better*..." Yet if every place has its mystery in the unseen, then place in cinema also has its portentous unforeseen, and in *Magnolia* it amounts to this: while the film so apparently and painstakingly binds its characters to a grid of abuse, denial, guilt, and rejection which we pleasurable enter to see them accuse, expose, confess, and forgive, the film also stridently places us at a remove from the frame that holds this all-encompassing map of transgression and loss. The perspective we gain by this detachment begs our comparison of the nightmare we escape with the world we should already know; but this is not always a comfortable position to occupy, and the squirming within it often leads to finger-pointing at a "pedantic" method and a "didactic" style of filmmaking. *Magnolia* is allegorical, but in the most contradictory of ways. It confronts us to judge our own places within our own world by presenting a world next-door spilling over with parables so lyrical they feel like a distraction from our mission. Given the swirling pans and gliding montages of its numerous simultaneous crises and the nerve-shattering crescendos and plunging meltdowns of their virtuoso performances, *Magnolia* is so operatic in structure and tone that it challenges us all the while it captivates us. One critic called

17 *Ibid.*, 6.

18 Referring to a long and gracious street traversing the residential and commercial San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles, where film writer-director-producer Paul Thomas Anderson grew up as the son of a television voice-over specialist, Ernie Anderson, now deceased, to whom he has dedicated *Magnolia*.

19 The script refers more than once to Exodus 25, but here I am referring to the film's overall form and content, and the fact that the film was released in late December, 1999.

Magnolia



the film a "manic meditation on karmic craziness"²⁰—we are driven from *Magnolia* to gather our wits about us with tools we are only beginning to discover.

Magnolia may feel strange, new, even unsettling ("flawed" is one of the more sophisticated or polite adjectives that have been used), but not for the reasons given in reviews and debates. Spectators who find the "issues cliché" or the "plot predictable" are actively dodging the social gravity, the psychological resonance and the emotional poignancy of the conflicts mined in the film's sensitive writing and talented ensemble acting. Viewers who find the film hackneyed in its creative use of a discontinuous prologue, a sing-along song and a disembodied soliloquy as editing schemes, and a bizarre cinematic effect that the film's printed intertext tells us "really happened" are begging for a synchronization of vision and voice, content and style in a director who is relying on their disparity. What seems established from the outset is a closed world with an ethos of clearly interlocking lives on an inevitable track of doom. It is written and there are signs, even if they are cryptic....

However, the film expands with a dynamic tension, and for this we also have clues, in both vision and voice and in their jarring interrogation of each other. In another era this clash of substance and style would have been noted as the Brechtian distanciation of epic theater or hailed as media self-reflexivity. Today we are so familiar with "Alienation-effects" that we take for granted the ways these theories were derived to show the "scheme of things" in art as in life, the relation of the parts to the whole in our world, so that we might see where we stand within it, and *what to do about it*.

"If I want to get to the bottom of who you are and why, then I think that your family history, your *actual family history*—well this is important," states an investigative journalist for a TV interview show as she flagrantly confronts one of the pivotal characters of the film, Frank T. J. Mackie. Evangelist of sadistic sexuality, he is one of several vehicles by which *Magnolia* links the cultivation of misogyny to commercial television and its role in the home. Frank, we might say, has "inherited" his slick technique, narcissistic predisposition, and cynical world view, all of which have enabled him on his path toward fame and fortune, devastation and demise. Placing love is something he learned only to regret. "I took care of him, and now, what then?" asks Linda Partridge, the current stand-in for Frank's deceased mother, as she refers to Frank's cancer-ridden father, Earl Partridge. Frank, Linda's mortal enemy, might long ago have asked himself the same question when as a youth he saw his mother die of cancer under his solitary care. And now, what then? The answer: Earl Partridge's caretaker asking Frank's handlers—and by extension, us, his potential audience—to take up the role in the scene *where we help out*.

Placing apocalypse in *Magnolia* is not about tracing the trajectory of frogs. It is about playing a role as a visitor on that street and then as a resident on our own.²¹ It is a matter of noting the nexus of person and parent, family and work, local habits and global auras, faux euphoria and buried fear in every household because *they really happen*. Pegging the time and place, venting rage and woe where they belong, putting sadness and dismay into their proper quadrants, is the only hope for setting things right. Apocalypse here is collusion between human action and divine intervention,

between the "angels" on the screen, even as they have come of age, and the specters placed beside the screen, be they voices talking (like the Narrator, or TV producer Earl Partridge, or Officer Jim Kurring) or singing (like Aimee Mann) or silently judging, (like us, covertly checking into our everyday lives).

Magnolia's turf is the head of a pin and the heavens above at once. Its cosmic ambiance is indicated in weather reports that chart waves of stormy skies. Its earthly locales, in effect so many "deathbeds," are presented at a throbbing pace; nevertheless critics have found its rhythm off-kilter, claiming that every scene plays like the *big* one. And so with coy subversion Earl Partridge mutters a critique of his own winding, spellbinding, deeply reflective epiphany on the uses of regret—"Oh, God, that's a long way to go with no punch." That distance is rich, more swelling than climactic, more prophetic than narrative. The film uses Jason Robards' tour-de-force performance, a reprise of his recent off-screen illness and historic stage and screen roles, to place us in a larger frame, a world outside, so that we can make all the better sense and use of our new connections with the characters. Cross-cutting in geo-time, *Magnolia* takes half a step forward and light years backward if hours are a measure of emotional damage. The film is not linear but spatial, its drama moving like a hurricane with an ever shrinking eye. And in that eye is the arena for staging the world's oldest quiz show, *What Do Kids Know?*, and its toxic fallout—cancers eating away at TV moguls and celebrities and parasites, suicide attempts in the face of insurmountable guilt, showdowns for young adults who have displaced their childhood abuse. *Magnolia*'s conflict is between time-coded fact and intuition, studied evidence and backhanded wisdom. The kids—and the women—know, but they are at a loss to *act*.

Astute writer that he is, P.T. Anderson builds revealing ironies within his characters by placing them in uncanny predicaments. Linda Partridge's real apocalypse is not that she fell in love late, in spite of her greedy self, but that her shame-on-you speech fired like a cannonball at two male pharmacists, about men disrespecting and judging her, is entirely apropos all the while their intuition to warn and save her is perfectly "dead on." Likewise, Claudia, celebrity Jimmy Gator's strung-out daughter, is "busted" by lonelyheart cop Jim Kurring in effect not for cocaine possession, but more profoundly and intuitively for a "187"—a domestic abuse record she has taken out on herself with a vehemence equal to the crime's covert violence. In a psychologically parallel scene, Frank Mackie is exposed for divorcing himself not from his father (Frank fosters the lie that he died, which corresponds with the hatred he obviously harbors for Earl Partridge) but from his mother (whom Frank deceptively claims is alive, and who, having inadvertently "abandoned" Frank when he was a teen in her lonely and painful death of cancer, is the source of his victimization of all women). When Frank is able to vent his anger at Earl, who deliberately abandoned him and his dying mother, instead of at the women Earl taught him to loathe, he is able to embrace Linda as a kindred spirit.

Just as the film so fluidly surveys the circle of characters

20 Jay Hoberman, *Village Voice*, December 21, 1999, 143.

21 Here I see *Magnolia* as more akin to Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* or Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* in both form and style than derivative of Robert Altman's *Shortcuts*, as many critics have claimed.

with Aimee Mann's liquid-love voice in her cover of "One," the lyrics for "You Do" and "Save Me" serve as the core text of the film,²² the former as dialogue sung by the characters and the latter as the finale's sung voice-over. For all its cosmic scale, *Magnolia* is an intimate film, its music as introspective as its heart-wrenching close-ups of pensive faces, soberly "present." The pseudo-worlds of the studios and their sets beaming the cool blues of TV tones, it is the soft browns, greens, blushes and milky whites of domestic sites that blossom, for there are as many rebirths as casualties in *Magnolia*. Those who "need to go to jail" do, by dying as they have been living. And those who survive will never be the same again.

In summary, *Magnolia* looks like a closed world at the outset when its narrator re-stages three news room headlines to posit that seemingly unrelated deaths, murders, and suicides are not mere coincidences. Braudy tells us that the "closed film," easily a crime drama both socially and psychologically, often opens "with a series of images that defines the film's nature, teaching its audience how to watch its particular world," its "totally formed vision" about individual obsession.²³ But P.T. Anderson presents these vignettes with such stylistic panache, which varies distinctly from one report to the next, that we are already impressed with his flair for form that is fascinating beyond the narrative itself. The minute *Magnolia*'s eloquently roving camera begins to link parallel scenes introducing its characters with a song that in its own composition and performance overrides these lonely lives with a lyrical commentary, we begin to sense that the frames of the montage are smaller than the visual field of the film, and that this field expands beyond *Magnolia* Blvd.

With the TV quiz show the role of chance is raised again (will the kids get the right questions, and know the answers?), and the small screen, which we see in each of the homes, permeates families and generations so as to dominate their ethos. But lying dormant in this ethos is a chorus of catalysts—a trio of peer judges (cop, nurse, and journalist) who rise up to alter the ethics by triggering productive collisions. Furthermore in this ethos, the children are the truth seers and the soothsayers. And as prophets they are proactive. The neighborhood rapper recites that the real "bust" will not be the arrest of one murderer but "the Good Lord bringin' the rain in" upon the long-time oppressor. Stanley Spector researches precisely these weather conditions. And when he falls victim to on-stage anxiety, he verbally shoots Jimmy Gator down—Jimmy, the exploitative father figure at-hand and better yet, the one "on the air." After little Dixon, the street poet who is the eyes and voice of the neighborhood, robs Linda Partridge, he saves her life, and by temporarily confiscating LAPD Officer Kurring's gun, he facilitates his capacity to love. *What Do Kids Know?* highlights the world outside the studio, but each arena displays its histrionic fortés and hysterical nose-dives. The frame of the quiz show, a place of cryptic signs and prophets who can read them, in this way enlarges the outer frame of the film by compelling us to compare the two worlds. Their presiding issue of self-love bleeds from one to the other, as do their apocalypses, and by the time of the crowning blow of the rain of frogs, that issue is stated anew as the initiation into a community.

Open films are generally concerned with the possibility of breaking out of confinement. By foregrounding media processes (Tom Cruise's perverse parodying of TV evange-

lism's format and his own superstar image) and those of the arts (the quiz show's micro-performances, both staged and spontaneous, of snippets of Brahms, Bizet, and Molière as well as the popular songs that inspired the film), *Magnolia* invites its spectators to enter its world freely, as critics and as aficionados, to take up a position within that world and see it expand. We can grow by helping to create a place that includes us.

A Liebesthriller ²⁴

... films appear to the audience as waking dreams.... The closed film actually raises the fear of never waking up.... There will be survivors. But the greater truth is that nature and society are in league to bury us alive, in the same way that we have passively submitted ourselves to the world defined by the huge screen before us.²⁵

Leo S. Braudy, *The World in a Frame*

Walked away released of all my crimes,
Walked away released of all my crimes,
But I could never hide
What I kept inside...

Walked away released of all my sins,
Walked away released of all my sins,
Yet you let us in
With all my sufferin'
When I held you that night
I knew it felt so right.
When I held you that night
I knew it felt so right.

Song, *Winter Sleepers*

To discover how we might grow within a claustrophobic world that appears to lock us in, we can now turn to an apocalyptic film that impinges on us with a closed aesthetic, by visiting the inhabitants of a Bavarian chalet in Tom Tykwer's heady *Winter Sleepers*.

The cosmos of this eerie wonderland is presented by God-in-a-camera, we might say, who has the omniscience to lead our eager eyes over crevices of the landscape so softly powdered with virgin snow that they are just waiting to snare the vain pursuits of self-serving, devil-may-care posers. Among them is a mysterious stranger, René, who in his own way circumscribes this world, and by slowing down the tempo to piece together his life, he inadvertently accelerates the film's apocalypse.

Looking like an antagonist and the embodiment of a fate that far exceeds the scale of this tiny resort tucked into the German Alps, he meanders, drunk at dawn, into the perfect set-up: a lusty young couple pantingly engaged in sex in a cozy cabin with a bare window, beside which is parked a shiny new Alfa Romeo, keys in the ignition and door wide open. René, who appears to be both a voyeur and an opportunist, snaps a photo and hops into the car for a fast ride. And while the ensuing events will lead the characters to suspect otherwise, these are the last of his crimes. But they are the beginning of a woeful fog of ironies that never lifts.



The first is the paradox that René is less a perpetrator than a victim—of a car accident, of a previous injury, and, not the least, of Marco, the man whose car he steals and loses. And with all of this, René becomes the catalyst of Marco's pending doom, but not because René is uninhibitedly impulsive, the radical flaw among the film's restless sleepers.²⁶ Here I'd like to introduce a more precise term: René becomes the *impetus* of the apocalypse because he acts in the face of inertia. But because he also develops the capacity to harness his urges, he is the one character who has the force to offer a true exchange of intimacy. This is not as it would appear, for René, usually half-dazed, seems sluggish, and ski-buff Marco is the one forever making split decisions and rash moves. However, for all of Marco's frenetic body routines between the bed and the slopes that can never compensate for his deprivation of spirit,²⁷ it is René, who can hardly tell "what end is up," so to speak, who manages to find and nurture love by modulating his pace.²⁸ He is neither the law nor the lawless in this skier's haven where the only way anyone goes fast is to go down. Rather, René is the gatekeeper of time, which is always too much and too little for Marco. "I wonder if life really has to be so long.... Have you had three good years? Three is quite a lot..." Marco ponders.

But René orients himself differently: his probes of time are visual. Whereas Marco is obsessed with appearances and is oblivious to time but caught up in its whirlpool and saddened by its effects, René is compelled by the *insignificance* of what he sees, of that which he photographs but which fails to yield a meaning, of all that he sees but cannot "place." By

etching the flow of time through his world in snapshots with a latent readability, René motivates the narrative and determines its direction, which is to come full-circle. His persistent scrutinizing of his relations with those who surround him pushes him toward self-confrontation, both retrospectively and potentially. This course of action gives the film its rhythm and its purpose.

Now it's important to note the reason for René's endless photos and tape recordings of his daily activities: in the army a grenade planted shrapnel in his brain, and he suffers short-term memory loss. Thus he has no idea that he took Marco's car joy-riding and, having been run off the road, left it buried in the snow—"kaput," dead, defunct symbol of power, status, and "place" in a world of wealth and leisure. The car is thus

22 Anderson has said these songs inspired him to create the characters he did, and that the film is very much for the women in his life, including his long-time best friend, Aimee Mann and his girlfriend, singer-songwriter Fiona Apple (Production Notes for *Magnolia*).

23 Braudy, p. 47, 49

24 Tykwer's term for the genre of *Winter Sleepers* which, translated from the German, means "love-thriller."

25 Braudy, p. 54.

26 A daughter's impulse to tag along when told not to, a father's impulse to reach for a phone while driving, and an athlete's impulse to ski to his death are the tragic events of this film.

27 *Winter Sleepers* is an adaptation by Tom Tykwer and Marie-Françoise Pyszora from her novel, *Expense of Spirit*.

28 "Duration is the problem with love: that awful intimacy which we cannot bear and yet always seek," says Tykwer in the production notes for *Winter Sleepers*. At the 1997 Locarno International Film Festival, he said the film is about "the attempts of 30-year-olds today—an in-between generation—to enjoy a measured and structured love life."



Winter Sleepers

invisible as evidence, not of the fate that placed a ten-year-old farmer's daughter in a deadly coma (for that was solely at her father's hand, and he does eventually find Marco's car, even if he does not find himself to blame) but of the rise and fall of Marco, who truly believed that with the hot new vehicle, he would have "arrived"—vis-à-vis the women he pursues, the men he emulates, and even himself. In fact the car's slow-motion flight into the winter sky and its plunge into the drifts of snow pre-figure Marco's own destiny, which will remain even more unseen, unheard of, and unmourned.

Braudy tells us that in the closed-film aesthetic, "nature... is, like the frame of the film itself, an imposition of destiny, even death, on the character caught inside; it is a magic book whose clues are open only to the director and the audience."²⁹ On the cinemascope screen of *Winter Sleepers* where the camera overlooks not a single cranny of possibility for binding person to place and its ominous power, Marco is doomed, but only we know this. He is the one character truly trapped by his false moves. His misplaced priorities and displaced accusations are his demise, and they take him, by virtue of his mounting guilt, down into a deep chasm that swallows him alive.

Noir world that *Winter Sleepers* is with its somber intrigues, superfluous living, and crimes of the heart, Marco's death trip can be read as the work of a femme fatale.³⁰ The film opens with a close-up of girlfriend Rebecca's gashed thumb, bleeding, a premonition of the deaths in the film, including Marco's fatal descent on the slopes, which begins in a nebulous "two-shot." A left-frame close-up of Rebecca's red lips

puffing smoke—the mountain mist that envelops Marco—dissolves to a right-frame long shot of his skiing body propelled directly toward her cigarette-free mouth. Yet his flight from the mountain's edge becomes strangely angelic and timeless, suspended in the swirling, awe-filled sadness of Arvo Pärt's *Elegy for Benjamin Britten* on the soundtrack, and cross-cut infinitely, we feel, with on-going life: Rebecca, homebound on a train joined in her compartment by broken-armed Nina—her would-be rival, if only she knew or cared, and the occasion of Marco's self-punishing death, if only *he* knew; Theo, splitting wood in the midst of the mountain peaks, grieving and misunderstood, especially by himself; and René, curled in a fetal position around the ever-sleeping Laura, caressing her belly as the camera encircles them from above, echoing its recurrent revolutions around René throughout the film as he has come to find his place. And then there is the central figure of the film hanging in the air—fate, defined as the interconnectedness and inseparability of all in life.

Fate plays its role perhaps more interestingly than does any individual in the film, since Tykwer has designed his "winterschläfer" as types more than as fully developed characters. They "sleep" differently from each other and, in fact, are color-coded accordingly: Marco's electric blues are cast upon him from the TV screen, his closest friend, who hypnotizes him with the consumer values that breed his covetous and possessive mentality; Rebecca's flaming red clothing, from her shiny coat and ice skates and satin dresses down to her silk robe and lacy lingerie, keeps her close to bed



and the telephone and the gothic romances she translates—"sleeping, reading, waiting..."; René's grays beg the clarity of the films he projects at the Sleepers Kino and the black and white photos he develops himself in his own darkroom, a reservoir of meaning that will bring him out of his memory fog; and generous nurse Laura's greens symbolize hope in the most mysterious sleeper of all, who breaks out in sweats and foul moods, gets the dry heaves, faints, and falls into slumber anywhere, any time, with the pure exhaustion of a pregnancy that evades her consciousness. Tykwer conspicuously places these characters in immediate settings that are color-appropriate, so that when someone like Marco plops on Laura's green couch or on Rebecca's red sheets or dons the red and green plaid robe of their chalet to behold his stolen car, he appears to be poaching. Likewise Theo, in the deep sleep of denial, dressed always in the earthy browns and golds that color the life of his declining mountain farm, finds himself in disharmony with the pristine white of the winter landscape, where everything is all too clear in the stark clean light.

In the overly organized and obsessively coherent visual form of the "closed film" we are both the victim and the jury: all the while we admonish Marco, we fear for our lives—or the half-lives we live, for we may be more like him than unlike him. All the details of the film conspire to impose the way of its world on us. For example, Theo strives to trace the image of the scar he saw on René's head in the squirts of his cow's milk in the morning bucket, in the markings made by the tins of his fork in his mashed potatoes at dinner, in the

shadows of twisted branches on his bedroom wall at night. All of these vestiges of a person in a place are vital signs for him, of life and death. But he cannot escape the limits of his sensibility, his right answers for the wrong question.

Winter Sleepers takes us to a nether world based on multiple and conflicting truths that are only partially known, subjectively researched, and mistakenly believed. The editing in parallel scenes, in the film's opening crisis of the car accident and in the ultimate apocalypse of Marco's death (among others), illustrates my point. When Theo fires the shot that kills his injured horse, the rapid montage is from his daughter, lying in a coma in the snow, to Theo, frightened and forlorn, to René at home, falling to his bed from the fatigue of intense failed self-reflection, to Marco, waking up to check the status of his car—revealing each character's distinct orientation to sleep and to life, all the while none of them has any knowledge of their connectedness in separate losses that converge in the same time and place. Likewise, when Marco slams a rock on the head of Theo's attacking dog and Theo cries out, "You killed her," it's neither the dog nor Theo's daughter who can possibly register with Marco. The "her" has to mean

29 Braudy, p. 55. Here I might add that our privileged spectator point of view in *Winter Sleepers* lets us know what most of the characters do not: that René stole Marco's car, that Theo ran René off the road, that Marco didn't kill Theo's daughter, that Nina suffered only an injury, but that Marco did have numerous lovers at once and ended his own life.

30 ... were it not for the film's endless detailing of Marco's daily routines that color him as a selfish and arrogant parasite and Rebecca as a diligent and inspired translator who accommodates him with a kind and loving heart.



Nina, or Rebecca, or any other woman who spurs his guilt, placing Marco in relation to others but mostly in relation to himself, a position he cannot bear any more than can Theo, for whom these very words should actually ring true.

Yet through Theo and the other characters in this deadly-drowsy ambiance, we create order by our acts of seeing. Much as René is, we are implicated in the ineptness the camera exposes, the weak-kneed sleepwalking that tends toward atrophy and points to the expense of spirit painfully exacted. The mountain crevasse that devours Marco—our wide screen's black hole of emotional hibernation, suicidal death, or the unconscious—can also be a womb, life, and birth. In the last shot of Tykwer's film winter is approaching again, but a baby has awakened, in a pale green sleeper, and her smile fills the frame. If we have taken heed of our dark journey, it is the end of our nightmare.

In *Winter Sleepers* "everything that appears develops randomly and insignificantly, and little by little the necessity of events conditions the characters who were hitherto standing on unknown ground with unsettled feelings,"³¹ says the writer/director/composer of his second feature film. Striving to share with us the plight of his own young generation, he shows us the precarious relation between inertia and impulse in a place where cause and effect are not discerned because their relation seemingly lies elsewhere. But it is also a place, a dark theater, where "sleep" can mean the attempt to intervene, to monitor those events, to see so as to remember, to learn how we can change our relation to place and our relative place within the "scheme of things."

Where Angels Tread

Location is the crossroads of circumstance, the proving ground of "What happened? Who's here? Who's coming?"—and that is the heart's field.³²

Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction" in *The Eye of the Story*

Just remember, the Madhouse is in a lot of places.

Rognwald, *Angels of the Universe*

If a closed film is a picture frame that contains, structures, and limits the world it displays, an open film is a window offering a privileged view of a world that stretches beyond our vista and existed before we arrived. A faraway place can be a remote locale but just as easily the recesses of a mind that seem all too accessible to others. That is, a place can be an interior hiding ground, an involuntary retreat, that cringes at the footstep of an intruder all the while it gropes for the embrace of the heart. A place can be a "dialectic of confinement and release... with revolving doors of visual meaning."³³

In an open film, the body itself can be confining when it prohibits one from making a connection, and an apocalypse can hinge entirely on the quest to break out of that confinement. Here we can regard the body as physical and the brain as biologically determined, but they are also confronted with the world as spiritual, imaginatively boundless as the soul.

Both body and soul impinge upon the mind, that fragile and fatigable network of human meeting points that makes demands of a given individual throughout life. This nexus, an interior window as wide as the heavens, is the place we visit in *Angels of the Universe*. Here Fridrik Thor Fridriksson presents an aesthetic as open as the poet's pen and the painter's palette, but it brings us to a world that dooms the mobility of its central characters.

Fridriksson carries us to his island of Iceland through the luminous nebula that convey Paul, body and soul. As the protagonist and also the narrator, Paul himself exists both within and beyond the film, in a world that will no doubt follow us out of the dark theater. From the beginning his voice directs our vision, and soon enough his body motivates the camera. Though he provides both the substance and the point of view of the film, his ethereal form often escapes the frame as a disembodied, off-screen voice; however, he never escapes the conflict he helps to articulate. Paul is the casualty of his own body's illness and also of his vulnerable, hyper, agonizing sensibilities that shed light on the world for others.

One result of this open-film aesthetic is our growing awareness of the painful fluidity of place and context. In *Angels of the Universe*, the home and the asylum become rotating sites of exhaust and collapse as the psychological catastrophes repeat themselves from person to person, "committed" or not, "insane" or not. The apocalypse is a cloud of anger and despair, but it is not the rage that possesses Paul as the schizophrenic he discovers himself to be so much as the contempt and neglect that inhabit his weaker antagonists. For in the immense sadness of the compassionate exchanges among inmates with their families and friends, the horror is mitigated by love.

Fridriksson offers us precisely this vision. The picaresque mode of the narrative might be expected to revolve around the deviant or psychotic episodes of Paul and his cronies, but instead it finds its way haphazardly through the lyrical reflections of Paul's posthumous psyche. Drawing our eyes to his "deranged" paintings and tuning our ears to the beat of his turbulent drum and poignant commentary, the film lets us know him as a mortal artist, musician, poet, and philosopher. Paul need hardly be an angel, too, but he is in this film, continually opening and closing the shutter on a variety of places that challenge our capacities for awe and dismay.

At the center is Klepp, the psychiatric hospital that Paul remembers as "a gigantic palace by the sea," a mysterious building where "the days pass in the sluggish vacuum of all that is vanished, burned, and lost."³⁴ Paul is taken there after a surge of violence in a restaurant, the police wading through the bay to arrest him as Paul, in his Christ persona, "walks on water" before our very eyes. God visits him in his bedroom at home through a superimposition on the screen that is repeated several times: for example, a woman who sits for the portrait he paints from memory appears to him, then flees like a phantom when he touches her. Gradually we become acclimatized to Paul's point of view as we see the hospital aides magically appear and disappear from Klepp's corridors to

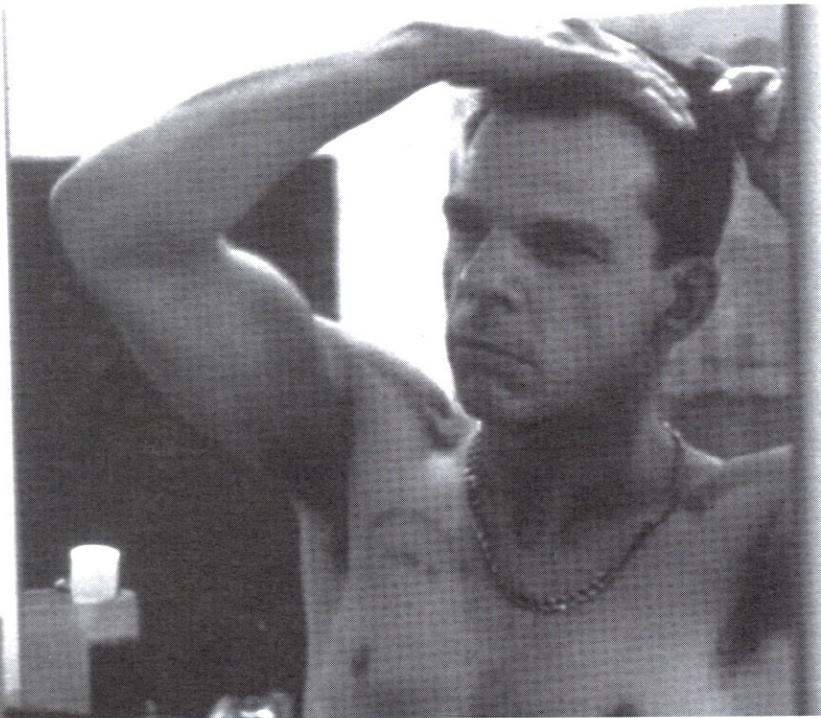


31 Tom Tykwer, Locarno International Film Festival, 1997.

32 Welty, p. 118.

33 Braudy, p. 55.

34 Einar Már Gudmundsson, *Angels of the Universe*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1995, pp. 3, 58.



restrain Paul and the others, and, ultimately, as the paramedics pop on and off the screen with their stretcher to retrieve Paul's corpse. In this way Paul's paranoid introjections become ours, and so do his dreams and stories, his allusions to the Bible and Icelandic tales and sagas, where people disappear into rocks and go astray on paths through dark forests only to haunt the earth, and others move through life under special curses laid by guardian spirits and the Maid of the Mountains.³⁵

Paul's friends might act as if they communicate by telepathy or have been to China or live "the good life" and will never become déclassé, but Paul sees their displacement just as he senses his own, and he feels their pain. "The fact that we're friends is the best proof that we haven't got any," Viktor tells him, rejecting Paul's idea to attend Peter's funeral after the suicide because they would just be ogled as outcasts by his family. But Paul himself, not anticipating his friend Rognvald's suicide, observes, "I took it like any other joke, that old cynicism of his, and I didn't want to die then beside this true friend who never forgot me even though I'd been buried alive and no one needed to know." Friendship is a deceiving lift for Paul, however, who comes to inhabit an empty apartment with no furniture but a TV and a mattress. "No one in my position ought to think about climbing higher in society than the top floor of a rehabilitation block," he ponders, after his mother questions how Rognvald could have "done such a thing" when he had "a house and a car and a lovely wife and clever children," all the signs of a well-adjusted life. The camera angle resumes the vertical position with which it opened the film, and we recall the reason that it gave us an "other-worldly" perspective on the place of Paul's life.

Angels of the Universe is about the losses of those who find themselves mentally ill. For this reason it is also about their connections with the people who love them: a mother and siblings, fellow mates "inside" and soul mates "outside" the walls of the asylum, the head psychiatrist himself, admired

for seeking reciprocal therapy, according to the narrator. The inability to use and develop one's talents, the pre-empting of an education, the stigma of being shut out of a career, the incapacity to generate and support a family, the confusion and devastation in loving oneself and others—these are the losses that make up the apocalypse of this film, and they are intersected by the patience of those who seek to understand and by the disdain of those without tolerance.

For both the screenwriter and the director, a place is a world approached with personal experience and time,³⁶ engaged and dilated in order to locate the "spirit of things." The camera here becomes a burning glass used to discover, explore, and see through, even to divine and prophesy.³⁷ Soaring over Reykjavik like an angel's eye on the earth, the vision is paired with a voice that shuttles in and out of the characters' lives from the hereafter. The sense of place brought to us by that voice and that vision, detached and ephemeral as they are, still generates a strange equilibrium, and not only that, a sense of direction, for the characters and for us.

With no firm footing at all, we are informed so as to know, to judge, to feel, and it occurs to us that those very sites of consciousness are never stable. Since it is the point of view of a schizophrenic looking over us from "above," our perspective is at once as mercurial and transparent as Paul's fluctuating moods and as tranquil and sagacious as his poetic voice. The music emanates from his momentary subjectivity rather than any objective disposition toward him as he and his counterparts, similarly diagnosed, float in and out of their alternate selves—Van Gogh, Jesus, a Beatle, Hitler. These young men face tantrums, delusions, and hallucinations on and off medication, physical restraint by police and hospital aides, and extradition from the home, the workplace, and social venues. These scenes work like lyric refrains as they recur: the shoes of the warden are heard clopping down the corridor of the asylum, and Paul tells us, "Listen, that's the bass drum of life... like blues that can't remember what it's about any more."

There is despondence, but also sardonic humor and esoteric wit. There is the beauty of good will. One escapade takes us to the President's home, a "White House" so accessible that Óli, on a field day from the asylum, is invited in for a friendly chat over tea with the leader of the nation without any security check, appointment, or supervision. What's more, he commands the President's lithe and respectful attention to his expressed aspirations. A subjective aspect of the narrative that looks like poetic license,³⁸ this delightfully surprising episode demonstrates the willingness of the film to "bump into" whatever in its expansive world might surface from the urges and fantasies—or nightmares—of its four main characters.

"Dreams: at the bottom of them we perceive the merciless onslaught of reality," reads Paul's mother after the third suicide of the film. And yet her child is not dead, he tells us, but sailing the blue sea in the mansions of the father, from which



he arrives through her door as a phantom far removed from the “eternal square one, the eternal last stop, of the professional loner” that was his place in life. Paul’s disembodied spirit is an organic part of the diegesis in *Angels of the Universe*: it expands our sense of place so as to redefine death. No longer the everyday dormancy of sedation and seclusion but rather integration into the hearts of others as the life force itself, Paul’s angelic slumber is one of felt wisdom, comprised of the same tension between philosophical detachment and poetic engagement that he struggled with throughout his life. An other-worldly apocalypse, it moves the outside in.³⁹

Beautiful Work!

Revolt itself is a reference and tribute to the potency of what is left behind. The substitute place, the adopted country, is sometimes a very much stricter, bolder, or harsher one than the original, seldom more lax or undemanding—showing that what was wanted was structure, definition, rigidity—perhaps these were wanted, and understanding was not.⁴⁰

Eudora Welty, “Place in Fiction,” *The Eye of the Story*

You always have a moment in life when you’d like to start from zero. The Foreign Legion is a place where boys go to do that... especially because they’re not asked what they did before.... In the

Legion there is a certain obligation not to express oneself. The cinema is perfectly designed to express what can’t be said.⁴¹

Claire Denis

In Godard’s *Le petit soldat*,⁴² “a young man is mixed up, realizes this, and tries to find clarity... it is, precisely, the story of a man who asks himself certain questions badly.”⁴³ To explore this character, Godard chose to present “the inside

35 With a written literature now a millennium old but a cinema only twenty years old, Icelandic films often reflect such a mysticism. Put another way, Fridrik Thor Fridriksson, at least according to his actors Ingvar Sigurdsson and Baltasar Kormákur (and to his other films, such as *Devil’s Island* and *Cold Fever*) doesn’t believe in death but in ghosts, monsters, elves, and in dying as “just another step... another place” (Interview with this author, April, 2000).

36 The screenwriter, Einar Már Guðmundsson, a long-time close friend of the director, adapted the script from his own award-winning novel by the same title (1993), which is the true story of his brother, Pálmi Órn Guðmundsson, who died in 1992 at the age of 43.

37 Welty, p. 125.

38 I am told by the director that it really happened.

39 “I like to make films about outsiders,” Fridriksson told me in a personal interview. “They’re more interesting. But also this is a way that they might be recognized by the society.” (April, 2000).

40 Welty, p. 131.

41 Claire Denis, Los Angeles, April 28, 2000, UCLA seminar.

42 His second feature, *The Little Soldier*, made in 1960 and banned by the French government for three years.

43 Jean-Luc Godard, *Cahiers du cinéma*, December, 1962, p. 138.

seen from the inside" while the external story unfolds. According to Godard, the film is like a "secret diary, a notebook, or the monologue of someone trying to justify himself before an almost accusing camera, as one does before a lawyer or a psychiatrist."⁴⁴ Actor Michel Subor portrays the man as dazed and lost in his macho self-image as a secret agent, someone who began his manhood deserting the French Army, then entered the OAS⁴⁵ and, refusing to carry out an assassination order,⁴⁶ escaped their torture and fled. All is told in a flashback after the opening line of the film, in Subor's voice-over, "The time for action is past, that of reflection is beginning." What would become of such a man? Claire Denis decided to enlist Michel Subor in her own film, *Beau travail*, playing the same character, Bruno Forestier,⁴⁷ forty years later. Yet it is another character who tells the story this time, the younger Galoup, and it is his private reflections, etched at the shores of the Gulf of Aden,⁴⁸ that structure *Beau travail*, again, largely through a flashback in voice-over.⁴⁹

Asked by French television's *la sept ARTE* to contribute to a series of films on what it means to be foreign, Denis decided to investigate a world she knew nothing about—male exclusivity and its supporting rituals.⁵⁰ Intrigued by *Le petit soldat*, she imagined Forestier could only end up somewhere like the Foreign Legion, which recruits loners who are rootless enough to be malleable. So she deliberately positioned herself in an enclave of international male mercenaries, an outpost mysterious and even taboo for her, despite its upholding of French national policy and cultural pride. Having grown up in French colonial Africa, she would be working on a turf integral to her knowledge and experience, though her relocation to Paris at age thirteen had brought her an alienation that lies at the heart of *Beau travail*. Fascinated since childhood with the theatrical decorum of the Legionnaires as they strutted along slow-motion-like in parades so as to distinguish themselves from the French Army, she wanted to explore the system of honor and obedience that would become a surrogate family for young men fit for its rigorous discipline.⁵¹ For her setting she chose Djibouti, "a piece of lava and salt in the Red Sea," suspended in time and place like a sailing ship in a Melville novel.⁵²

A place can become an arena when we see a character "pop out" in relation to the context. "Paradoxically, the more narrowly we can examine a fictional character, the greater he is likely to loom up. We must see him set to scale in his proper world to know his size."⁵³ By confining a character, a place can intricately take his measure, but always with regard to a larger sense of time and space, and this is the core truth that haunts *Beau travail*. It is the theater of the isolated, insulated, Legionnaires, with all their pomp and empty circumstance, that allows them to "loom up" in the austere environs of Djibouti amidst an on-going culture placed at a far remove by Sergeant Galoup, regardless of his pastime at the local disco. He dramatizes the extent to which the Legion is a world unto itself, and the only one, for those who choose it as "a place to belong," a brotherhood they never had, or worse, an ethos of indisputable rules they have not made, of rigid hierarchies that defy challenge, and yet, with seemingly arbitrary methods of enforcement.⁵⁴

Denis could not be more bold or masterful in using her medium to peer through the chinks in this armor. With an

innovative choreography of images that feels inherent in the far country of this emotional terrain, she shows how "the move we make in the place we live signifies our intent and meaning."⁵⁵ That is, she makes observable the actions that define us to others, that, shielding against chaos or masking against exposure (in the case of Galoup it is both), ultimately save us or destroy us. Gilles Sentain, a new recruit to the Legion whom Galoup sees as his nemesis, is a "local hero" in this context, and the insecure sergeant is compelled to destroy him, but in so doing, Galoup cannot save himself, for in all the aura of the sergeant's elected shrine to military masculinity, he has chosen a god who is without ideals. "If it weren't for fornication and blood, we wouldn't be here," mocks the hardened Forestier with Ali, his qat-chewing chum from the city,⁵⁶ as they cruise it at night by car. In the endless irony of the film, Forestier repatriates Galoup for his backstabbing banishment of Sentain. Thus Galoup, in his excessive vigilance and deference to his Commandant, actually destroys himself.

"Maybe freedom begins with remorse," Galoup heard somewhere (conceivably in viewing *Le petit soldat*), and it is with a perfectly ingenious ambivalence that Claire Denis positions her sergeant to embrace that freedom (now as the upshot of at least three generations of displaced characters, beginning with Cocteau's Forestier). Exiled to Marseilles for "disciplinary reasons" and moving through his day with the same banal, domestic routines he practiced in Djibouti but here entirely out of context despite the military hues of his apartment, balcony, and clothing, Galoup concludes with an enthralling ritual. In the surreal realm of memory, it relocates him to the disco floor he knew so well, now empty, a chiaroscuro stage where Denis Lavant, garbed in night-time black with spats and feeling his way through a swaggering, Gene Kelly-style soft-shoe strut to the flying sit-spins of hip-hop to the whirling gyrations of an orgasmic spasm, dances to his death.

This thoroughly enigmatic performance comes as an utter surprise, a literally fantastic finale to a film that, in retrospect, looks like one striking phantasmagoria. Lavant's dance is a virtuoso solo from a character we never imagined with such passion and talent. The result is a *déjà vu* that places all of the film's methods in bolder relief. Pursuing her subject matter through abstraction, Denis chose Djibouti for its stark elements: its torrid, rocky desert meeting seaside cliffs that fall to turquoise water upon white sand and volcanoes protruding "like three sentinels" in the gulf. There, fifteen male bodies, sculptures in motion, conform to the harsh sun, rigid rules, and each other.⁵⁷ How these bodies fill the frame is emotionally staggering. Agnès Godard's positioning of the camera largely determines the sense of place that is the film, enhanced utterly by Nelly Quettier's editing, which extends, layers, jolts, or binds as aptly as any sage or poet, and as elegantly and voluptuously as Denis hones her characters. For example, the rivalry between Galoup and Sentain impeccably symbolizes the rule of repressed expression when a wordless, blowless, "duel of looks" transpires as the two stalk each other, tiger-after-tail, in an increasingly tightened circle, all but hissing their antagonism.⁵⁸

Throughout the film the ensemble of fifteen bodies moves as one with variations on a theme: calisthenics, obstacle courses, drills, maneuvers; sweeping, chopping, washing,



ironing; swimming, fishing, diving, eating. The tactile physicality of these routines builds, as does the chanting oratorio of Benjamin Britten's *Billy Budd* that floats through the film's score, the waves of male voices highlighting the general tone of silence that unfolds with finesse. Inside, this world is filled with awe. Outside, its onlookers gaze upon it with baffled amusement. As spectators we find an incredible imbalance in the equation between provision and need that inhabits this place: the more sensual these bodies appear to be—the more ready, the more fit, the more splendid—the less purpose they achieve, and the greater the waste of their form and content. Denis' concept is clear: the more rapt and glorious the men, the greater their loss to the world. Beauty has never been more subversive. The physical perfection in this clan of minor gods is as stunning as it is tragic, perhaps no more brilliantly conveyed than in a long panning shot from the refreshing waters of the bay to the soldiers' clotheslines strung with scorched socks and shorts. A subsequent sequence begins with two low-angle shots of the men crawling and then walking on high parallel cables like virile tightrope artists in a circus, and the cut is to similarly parallel ropes seemingly hung with scarecrows, the men's undergarments flapping in the combat colors of camouflage fatigues, all the more charred-looking for Agnès Godard's powerful use of the sky's backlighting, suggesting the remnants of the men after battle.

One of the few other actual premonitions of death comes with a burst of red that takes over a sky-blue frame with

patches of gold and ash falling to a green ocean in a sequence of images shot and edited with such a rare beauty that they create their own sense of loss as they leave the screen. A helicopter was "practicing emergency maneuvers." It explodes and a Legionnaire is killed. "For a reason unknown to the experts, it plunged head-first to the sea," Galoup's diary tells

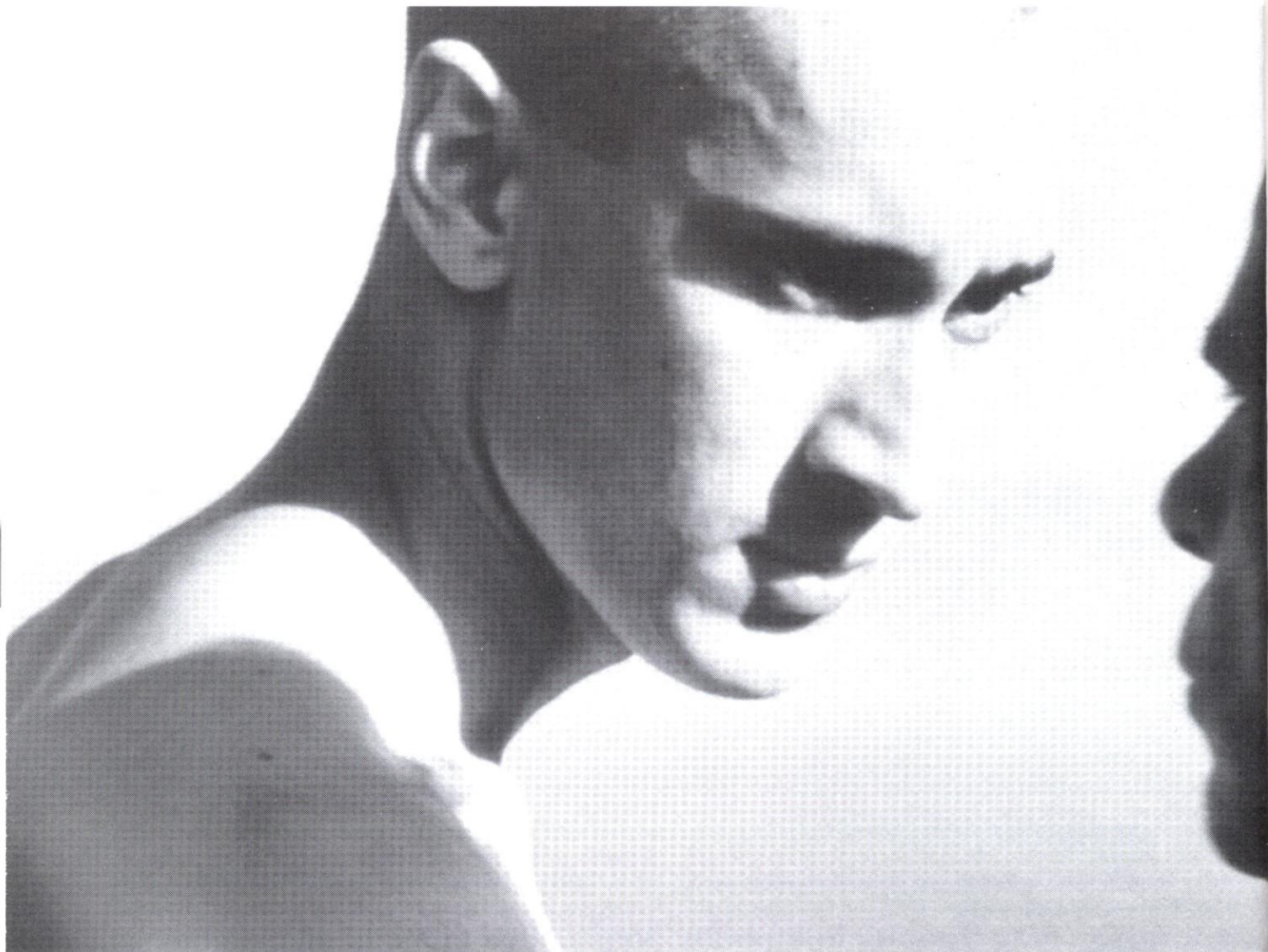
44 In an interview with Godard regarding *Le petit soldat* in *Cahiers du cinéma* in July, 1960, p. 109, Godard describes the film as the story "of a man who feels that his reflection in the mirror does not correspond with his own image of himself, a man who thinks women should not be over twenty-five, a man who loves dear old Haydn's music, a man who wishes he too were able to carve his way with a knife, a man who is very proud of being French because he loves Joachim du Bellay and Luis Aragon, and who yet remains a little boy—so I have called him *The Little Soldier*."

45 The Organisation de l'Armée Secrète, a terrorist organization of the European-Algerian extremists in 1960.

46 Forestier refuses not on any clear principle, but "just because," naïve to the fact that his latest "flirtation," Veronica, works for Algeria's FLN and will be tortured and killed by the OAS as a response to his cavalier escape. This is the "rumor that dogged him," according to Galoup, which is never made explicit in *Beau travail*.

47 Named for Jacques Forestier, who, in Cocteau's first novel, *Le grand écart*, is a brooding boy who casually attempts suicide after betrayal in his first love. Forestier's blasé defiance of the given order in *Le petit soldat* and Galoup's in *Beau travail* are both, to their minds, tantamount to "suicide"—or in our terms, personal "apocalypse."

48 The film is set and shot largely in Djibouti, colonized by the French for nearly a century and a half. Once French Somaliland, a small territory in East Africa separate from the larger Italian and British Somalia (that these Europeans gained in World War II and gave up to independence in 1960), Djibouti, with a harbor accepting ships from the Suez canal via the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean via the Gulf of Aden, did not gain independence from France until 1977.



us, uncannily alluding to his own demise. Pinpointing this crisis as the moment when Sentain's heroism comes to the fore, Galoup reflects, "That day something overpowering took hold of my heart. I thought about the end. The end of me. The end of Forestier." The close-up on Galoup's face, never more forlorn, and the cut to the cement graves, encrusted with salt, jutting up from the rocky earth at the Corsican's funeral, locate Galoup in his own apocalyptic moment. All the rest—even his elaborate machinations to frame Sentain—is pure emotional fallout, for the sergeant knows he has reached a point of no return.

In the ghost army of the Legion, whose hollow honor is cast upon the mold of repression and enforced through a pretentious authority, Galoup is sympathetic as he inevitably cuts off his life-line to the boys beneath the uniforms, *les petits soldats*, who might have made him "one of their own." He ends up taking his own measure, Galoup in the mirror, as did Forestier in the mirror, as they both did looking fondly through a chain-link fence upon the young Legionnaires frolicking in the sea. Galoup's remorse can only be placed within the context of the Legion, for even in Marseilles, where his own mind's eye asks him, "What did I see of wild camels, of

shepherds appearing from nowhere, women in bright colors in fields of stone, of all these images?" we know that, consumed by his place within his place—his power, charm and sway within his rank, his relative appeal within his role—he would never have seen Djibouti's faces the way they saw him, or the way they saw Sentain, left to die alone, parched on a bed of salt, as their caravan rescued him from Galoup's abuse.

Denis opens her film with a mural and a dance, a local wall painted brightly with a profile of a Legionnaire on the horizon, and a handful of local women flaunting their self-assured bodies with airs of pleasure as they bob to the rhythm of a sensual song. This is our frame upon the Legion as we know it, a frame outside, that celebrates movement, rhythm, color and light, texture and form—the ambient spirit of a given place, a place where carpets are woven and sold, where people fast and gather to pray, come and go on buses and boats, camels and trains, reading and telling each other stories, roasting nuts and laughing over loves.

Inside that frame is another world where foundlings share their birthdays, teach each other their languages, defend each other from indignity, save each others' lives.

And in both of these frames is a physical space of open skies, silver water flashing over white sand, wind howling past mountain peaks.

All of these open Denis' film to the spontaneity of ongoing life, the mundane routines that fill hours and days. The more magnificently she chisels and polishes the gems that are her frames, the more she convinces us that they *are* the frames of life that make up her place, jewels of bodies and wills in the face of strong elements that challenge them to survive. Denis brings an open frame on an open world to an overtly and meticulously crafted aesthetic, hypnotically organic to its source. The result is apocalyptic: the "far country" of the Legion, where rules were wanted, and understanding was not. Denis shows us that even the zero point—both a beginning and an end—has its history, its past, its people, and therefore its place.

The Fever that Leads to Sleep, the Sleep that Leads to Dreams

Braudy reminds us that in films, a place is more than a setting, a locale, a *mise en scène*. A frame, both open and closed, becomes a domain of heart, mind, and soul. The invisible potential of a place comes to light in its ominous details, Braudy tells us, and inherent in the cinema is the capacity to bring our eye to that light. The cinema, even and especially in its apocalyptic moment, is a site of pedagogy, and a sense of place delivers us to that site:

... place can focus the gigantic, voracious eye of genius and bring its gaze to point. Focus then means awareness, discernment, order, clarity, insight—they are like the attributes of love. The act of focusing itself has beauty and meaning... Indeed, as soon as the least of us stands still, that is the moment something extraordinary is seen to be going on in the world.⁵⁹

The cinema is a place to "sit still." Though we may be far away in the dark, the cinema shines light on our millennium, on the big screen that is life, our world, next to and with each other.

Through the filmmakers discussed here, who have drawn their inspiration from novels and poems, songs and operas, films by others and the lives of real people who have come and gone, we have seen that "to place" is to recollect clearly, to put in relation, to establish a connection. We can "place" apocalypse the way we do a voice on a tune, a word in a poem, an image in a frame. For the filmmakers themselves, a place is experience, meaning, feeling. Place bestows validity and trust, including our trust in the artist's map for the tasks at-hand. We have learned to question protocol and habit, to stand in awe of an indefinite expanse or a tiny presence, to appreciate the difference between owning and belonging. We have understood the ethos of a given place as the spirit that moves it, or the principles that govern its modes of expression. In apocalyptic cinema, that ethos can be a spreading malaise, a tragic predisposition, certain tendencies of the heart.

Magnolia has shown us an apocalypse as prophetic as the Book of Revelation (or the film's opening media vignettes), as wildly unrestrained as Rollingman's entry into the world. We have seen the pseudonyms of Frank Mackie, Óli Beatle, and

even Gilles Sentain ("the name he gave when he signed up") playing their symbolic roles in the "state of things," whether in the TV studio, the asylum, or the barracks. We have witnessed "fate" locating doom as imminent, hiding under ice on a winding road or snow on an Alpine crevasse. Cosmic forces, angels included, have proposed a life after death in which babies are born in pale green sleepers and the righteous are resurrected from beds of salt.

We opened this discussion in a cemetery, that dark chamber of sleep where illness, accident, and suicide have parked people to rest, but where, as we have seen, specters and murmurs re-visit the delirium that was life. So the last stop, the "dead" end, is really the fulcrum of the apocalyptic lever—thus also the zero point, square one, the new start or the different "life." The shot—whether a bullet, morphine, or cognac for which one cannot pay, and the landing spot—whether the sea over a cliff or the pavement below a tall building or a mountain hole that becomes a womb giving birth, or simply a peaceful hill with a tree that is far from one's lonely apartment, these are the vehicles and the destinations, but we have come to see a place as bigger, richer, grander than these, as illumination in the darkness, even if only a flying flame or a flickering light.

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49 The opening lines to *Beau travail* in the voice-over of Galoup are extremely resonant, within the film itself as well as with Forestier's voice in *Le petit soldat*. Galoup reflects, "Marseilles. Late February. I have time to kill now. I screwed up, from a certain point of view. Points of view count. Angles of attack. My story is simple. That of a man who left France for too long, a soldier who left the Army as a sergeant, Chief Master Sergeant Galoup. That's me. Unfit for life. Unfit for civil life." Later in *Beau travail* in a seemingly unrelated vignette in Marseilles, a woman at a newsstand insists on buying "a Swiss newspaper, in French, from Geneva, and not one nobody reads," an explicit and ironic reference to Forestier's career in *Le petit soldat* as a photojournalist in Geneva where he fled when he deserted the French army, as did King Louis Philippe (see note 49).

50 Claire Denis, "City of Lights, City of Angels," Directors' Guild of America, Los Angeles, April 27, 2000.

51 The Foreign Legion, the elite formation of the French Army recruited from non-French nationals, was launched by Louis Philippe (the "Citizen King" who himself deserted to the Austrians as a young man and lived in Switzerland, the US, England, and Italy) in 1831 to pave the way for the colonization of Africa. The Legionnaires have forever been the subject of romance and adventure, with a reputation of toughness.

52 Claire Denis in "Claire Denis' Band of Outsiders," Interview with Amy Taubin, *Village Voice*, April 4, 2000.

53 Welty, p. 122.

54 Denis has said that in conceiving *Beau travail*, she was inspired by Herman Melville's novella, *Billy Budd* and his two poems, "The Night March" and "Gold in the Mountain," as well as Jean-Luc Godard's film, *Le petit soldat* and Nagisa Oshima's film, *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*, all of which dramatize such worlds, the latter with particular verve and style.

55 Welty, p. 122.

56 It is actually Forestier, not Ali, whom we see stretched out on his bed in his nightly ritual, with a pile of fresh qat leaves as big as his pillow.

57 "The image is very pure, because it was shot with entirely natural light, and the light is very soft, because it was December." Claire Denis, UCLA seminar, April 28, 2000.

58 "(Between the script and the shooting process) sometimes I had not to insist on what we had written, but to trust the sensation of the moment, what had been exchanged by the characters, them between each other and also between them and the frame. For example, the 'duel of looks' between Galoup and Sentain says it all; it was planned as a physical fight with words as well, and this became superfluous." Claire Denis, UCLA seminar, April 28, 2000.

59 Welty, p. 123.

by **Robert K. Lightning**

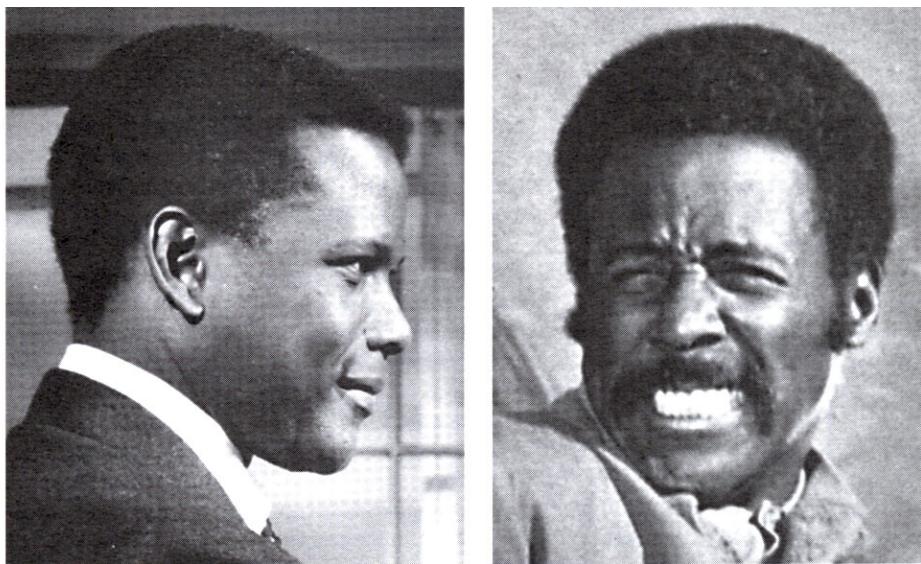
Interracial Tensions

in *Night of the Living Dead*

In discussing *Night of the Living Dead* Robin Wood finds the significance of the black hero's color in its separating him from the norms of the white characters (he is the only non-white in the film)¹. His difference is thus the source of his comparative strength: he is able to survive beyond any of the other major characters. Richard Dyer in his article *White*² reverses the critical practice of deconstructing the cinematic depiction of the Other (as the possible site of stereotypical and/or oppressive images) by focusing instead on the cinematic construction of *white* images in an attempt to uncover the onscreen "invisibility" of dominant culture, its ability to present its norms as normal and thus becoming the background against which the Other is contrasted and judged. For Dyer Romero's treatment of race reverses the values often attached to cultural stereotypes. Thus, for Dyer, the frequent depiction of whites as controlled and rational becomes in *Night* associated with rigidity and death (as represented by the dead) and black energy (often associated with chaos and destruction) with life. That some purpose is intended by the casting (beyond a liberal attempt at color blind casting) seems more obvious when considering both the genre (black representation in horror being rare at that time) and the era (a



Night of the Living Dead



black lead almost always signaled a social problem picture). I would like to consider the film's treatment of race in light of certain cultural/historical/political phenomena that neither critic considers (although I have taken a cue from Dyer's relating the film's fire/light imagery to 60's black rebellion) but also in light of the onscreen dynamics of the relation of white characters to the black hero which reflect historically valid interracial social dynamics.

It must be acknowledged immediately that although race is Romero's primary concern, it is not the only one and a complete reading would take into account other issues. The historical moment of *Night*'s production and release saw the emergence or peak of three radical movements (the youth movement, black militancy, modern feminism) and each finds its representation in *Night*. One might consider for instance the film's feminist concerns as revealed through the characterization of Barbra, the obedient patriarchal daughter, whose encounter with two "dead" wife figures can be read as a critique of her possible future bourgeois existence: the dead woman (in symbolic terms the lady-of-the-house) at the top of the stairs of the house, as once sinister and homey, in which Barbra takes refuge and becomes entrapped and Helen Cooper, a woman caught in a death-in-life existence through her stalemate of a marriage. Less specifically, *Night* is representative of a group of late 60s/70s films Robin Wood has labeled the American apocalypse movie. Reflecting the general breakdown in ideological confidence characteristic of the era, these films, transcending genre, depict the utter dissolution of American society and ideology. Thus in *Night* we have not only the helplessness of individuals to combat the dead but that of the U.S. government itself.

As with several other apocalypse films (e.g. *The Wild Bunch*), *Night* ends with the death of all its major characters. Given the failure of the government to combat the dead, order is restored by an armed posse but, given the parallels established between living and dead (representing, among other things, a relentless petit bourgeois consumerism) as well as the connivance of the U.S. government (whose space program is possibly responsible for the horror) the culture restored is viewed as intractably corrupt. Worse still, the film's most disturbing act, the killing of its black hero Ben, is

enacted by the restorers of order, the posse. There is no denying, then, the film's predominant tone of despair. Ben's death (in its abruptness, as shocking as Marion's in *Psycho*), however, refers to a practice the significance of which points the viewer beyond the historical moment, and thus links an era's despair to a fundamental tendency of American culture.

The Ebony Saint Meets Shaft

We can best judge Ben's cultural significance if we view him in the context of two iconic representatives of blackness in the American cinema, the first being Sidney Poitier, 'the black knight', 'the ebony saint'. These appellations (applied respectively by critics Catherine Sugr and Daniel J. Leab)³ reflect the ambivalence felt by many regarding Poitier's screen image, an ambivalence voiced by Clifford Mason in his once notorious article "Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So?"⁴. In retrospect the ideological project centered on Poitier (not without antecedents) is of considerably more complexity than merely producing the perfect model of the assimilated black man, as is often implied in criticism of Poitier. The project's terms are revealed by a narrative pattern that recurs throughout his *oeuvre*, established in his very first film, *No Way Out* (Mankiewicz, 1950). There Poitier portrayed an intern subject to baiting by a patient, a pathological racist. During the course of the film Poitier learns to manage his own antipathy toward the man in the name of the impersonal standards of his profession (a recurring aspect of the Poitier film) but also because of a heightened sense of duty and personal responsibility. *No Way Out* and other Poitier vehicles readily grant black professional competence as well as blacks embodying middle-class standards of social responsibility (with which Poitier's sense of duty typically colludes) but in light of concurrent demands by black Americans for "full integration", place the primary burden of responsible social behavior on the black insurgent himself. That respon-

1. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (Columbia University Press, 1986, p.116)

2. *White* (Screen 29, #4, Autumn 1988)

3. From respectively *Black Films and Filmmakers: A Comprehensive Anthology* (compiled by Lindsay Patterson, New York 1975) and *From Sambo to Superspade* (Leab, Boston 1976)

4. *The New York Times*, November 10, 1967

sible behavior commits the Poitier hero *personally* to a regimen of self control, self denial and, ultimately, the selfless aid of whites (*No Way Out* ends with Poitier, himself injured by his racist patient, administering aid to that patient) testifies to the persona's roots in historical concepts of model (that is politically moderate) black behavior.

Poitier's films are more interesting than this narrative pattern would suggest: if for no other reason they would fascinate by their internal contradictions and narrative lapses. And it should be noted, the pattern is always inflected by what is most consistently progressive in Poitier's work: his radical sense of self⁵. But by 1967 (the year of his greatest popularity) the pattern—Poitier heroically achieving a state of socially enlightened grace (so to speak) in the face of white racism—had come to seem passe and the parodic references to sainthood and knighthood follow naturally. Hollywood's promotion of a popular black star who regularly relies upon self control and thoughtful engagement to combat bigotry could hardly be more significant during an era when, by 1967, black protest had come to be dominated by two diametrically opposed strategies: passive resistance and the variety of strategies and political philosophies grouped under the label "black power". The virtual elimination of the pattern from Poitier's work after 1967 coincides with the growing predominance of nationalist and separatist ideologies in black politics which gives rise in turn to the emergence of another iconic figure, the "blaxploitation" hero. The differences between Poitier and the heroes of blaxploitation are obvious but two points should be made to contextualize the black hero of *Night*. First the retaliative/retributive aggression against whites that Poitier characteristically forgoes, is given full vent in blaxploitation. The postscript to *Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song* (Van Peebles, 1971) sets the tone for much of its progeny: "WATCH OUT—A BAADASSSS NIGGER IS COMING TO COLLECT SOME DUES". Second, in contrast to the typical Poitier film which is rarely set in a black social world, the dramatic setting for blaxploitation films is most often a black urban ghetto (betraying the economic class targeted by producers). This again reflects the growing popularity in the black community of a politics of separatism over that of integration.

Ben occupies a transitional phase (both temporal and in terms of racial signifiers) between the Poitier of 1967 and the blaxploitation hero. One might propose that the link to Poitier is reflexively implied by Ben's status as hero, Poitier being the only contemporary black star to be so consistently cast as heroic leads. Ben's appearance also recalls Poitier: he sports the casual wear (slacks, button-down shirt and sweater) habitually worn by the contemporary urbanites Poitier portrayed during the 1960s (e.g. *A Patch of Blue*). Like Poitier, Ben is also placed within a white social world, here (appropriate to the genre) made grotesquely threatening. Here, however, distinctions begin to emerge for although Ben attempts to work cooperatively with whites his sense of social responsibility does not extend into the realm of personal denial. And as the retaliatory killing of Mr. Cooper makes clear, Ben's aggressiveness anticipates the ruthlessness of the blaxploitation hero. Ben can easily be read as the Poitier hero transposed from the social problem film to the horror film, which in turn provides a dramatic environment more explicitly threatening than the urban work world often inhabited by

Poitier (Ben tells Barbra at one point "We've got to get where there are some other people") and his survival tactics adjust accordingly.⁶

White vs Black

Just what differentiates Ben from the whites? We can deduce by the film's mid-point (it is implicit in dialogue between Ben and Mr. Cooper) that whites are comparatively vulnerable to the dead: outside of the sheriff's posse, no whites are seen to kill any of the dead, while Ben disposes of several. What constitutes this vulnerability? First, as all the dead are *white*, they are other white bodies upon which violence must be enacted. If this sounds dubious one has only to compare the white characters' flailing vulnerability to the dead with the ease with which they (the whites) enact violence upon *Ben's* body (Barbra's slap to Ben's face, Cooper's drawing a gun on Ben, etc.). A TV announcer tells us that the dead are like "ordinary people", a point made emphatically clear when we see the dead in various states of domestic undress or when later an aerial shot of the sheriff's posse appears at first to be the dead wandering across the landscape. For the whites the dead represent people like themselves, in fact their mirror image. This underscores on one level what is so unnerving for the white characters: the dead are the familiar made strange. This leads logically to their symbolic function: the dead represent (in Wood's words) "the legacy of the past, of the patriarchal structuring of relationship"⁷. Each of the leading white characters displays a commitment to these "dead" social structures and thus is vulnerable to the dead: Barbra through her annual cemetery visits in memory of a father she cannot remember; the Coopers to their inescapable marriage; and Tom and Judy to a conventional heterosexual relationship.

A pronounced characteristic of the whites (if we, following Dyer, examine the film's treatment of race in terms of specific personality traits) is a ruthless self interest which is, in turn, only the outward manifestation of their commitment to patriarchy's two most insular social structures: the nuclear family and the heterosexual couple. This is in contrast to *Ben's* promotion (largely) of collective action to combat the dead. The presentation of Tom and Judy demonstrates the confluence of these elements. First, while making us aware of the conventional nature of their relationship Romero chiefly renders their commitment as touching and tender. But in terms of self-interest it can hardly be ignored that Judy's major concern (preceding the group's efforts to retrieve gas for their escape) is the necessity that *Tom* participate, that *her* lover (rather than someone else) should be endangered. Further, as everyone has a specific duty to perform during the mission, a successful deployment of collective action is completely undermined by Judy's display of romantic devotion, her impulsive dash from the house to accompany Tom. Finally, the couple itself is literally endangered by Judy's action, for Tom, already panicky, is completely undone by her presence, committing a series of errors that leads to the failure of the mission and ultimately to their deaths.

The Virgin Knight Meets Sweet, Sweetback

If one had to sum up the significance of the typical Poitier narrative it would be to make the case for American liberalism, a thematic constant whether it is the Poitier character

who must learn to trust in American liberalism (*No Way Out*, *Red Ball Express*, *The Blackboard Jungle*) or whether he himself embodies the liberal spirit (*Edge Of The City*, *A Patch Of Blue*, *To Sir With Love*). As racism in the Poitier film is typically embodied by either lower class whites or the representatives of an invalid American aristocracy, liberalism, as presented, betrays a strong class bias. The essential American spirit as defined by the films is egalitarian, rewarding merit without racial bias but (perhaps more importantly for much of Poitier's white audience) also without racial *favoritism*: betraying its essentially conservative racial politics, *No Way Out* goes out of its way to make the point that Poitier, the hospital's first black intern, will not get and should not expect preferential treatment because of his race. As Poitier's films repeatedly define the impersonal world of professional labor as the only social sphere able to guarantee equality, professionalism is implicitly equated with social liberalism and this partly explains the challenge in several films for the Poitier hero to meet and maintain professional standards. This emphasis on professional standards along with their habitual privileging of *individual* achievement in the learned professions to 'uplift' the race as a whole betrays, again, the middle class bias inherent in Poitier's films.

It is when they move into the private sphere of sexual relations, specifically with white women, that the Poitier narratives begin to crack and fray, further revealing the limits of liberalism. Poitier's relations with white women are typically polite, chivalric, even (in *The Slender Thread*) therapeutic. Above all they are *nonsexual*. This sexual segregation produces a paradox, however, one largely unresolved in the films until *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*: in both his role as Hollywood star as well as the film's hero, convention demands that (at film's conclusion) Poitier be paired with the cultural figure who best encompasses the values of the civilization to which he has been acculturated, a white woman. This represented an ideological contradiction so profound (the symbolic perpetuation of the family and dominant social norms represented by the couple who nullify white racial reproduction) that it threatened to eliminate a large portion of Poitier's audience and strategies had to be devised to postpone this for as long as possible. The primary strategy was to desexualize Poitier's onscreen presence as much as possible. Thus not only doesn't Poitier relate sexually to white women, he rarely relates sexually to *anyone*. In *A Patch of Blue* and *To Sir with Love* as in most of his films Poitier is the black knight whose sexuality is an enigma, neither expressible by Poitier nor the filmmakers.⁸

Because unexplained within the text (but presumed by producers to be commonly understood by audiences) Poitier's sexual reticence with white women is the singular source of narrative incoherence in his work, particularly evident when the white heroine herself makes overtures (as she does in the films mentioned above). This is, again, in contrast to the blaxploitation hero. In the blaxploitation film interracial sex is a fairly common occurrence (*Shaft*, *Sweetback*, and *The Mack* provide notable instances) chiefly to underline the hero's sexual charisma. White women however, are presented as no more than sexual playthings, to be used and discarded (or treated with disdain). Despite the fact that black women are hardly revered in these films, there is obvious attempt here to transmute western culture's white

woman/woman of color dialectic, the former equated with sexual restraint, the latter with promiscuity. From the silents to the 70's, black male/white female on screen relationships have been characterized by exploitation, whether economic/social (the exploitation of black labor in *Gone with the Wind* and other plantation romances) or sexual (the exploitation of white women in the blaxploitation film), the blaxploitation film merely reversing the roles of exploiter and exploited and the nature of the exploitation. What has rarely been presented is a mutually beneficial alliance of the two (whether sexual or political or both) or an honest examination of the reasons for its impossibility. *Night of the Living Dead* realizes ambiguously several of the points I have tried to make, suggesting some of the issues that hinder a real communication between the races.

"There'll probably be a lot more of them as soon as they find out about us."

(Ben to Barbra in *Night of the Living Dead*)

What I will attempt to do now is render clearer the nature of these ambiguities within *Night*. As noted Barbra is built up in the early moments as the obedient patriarchal daughter, paying homage to both mother and father by her annual cemetery visits (accompanied by her brother Johnny whose irreverent attitude challenges cultural mores. His death will be answered at the conclusion with the death of Ben, the black man whose heroic behavior also challenges the social order). Unnerved by her discovery of a woman's mutilated body, Barbra runs from the farmhouse in which she had taken refuge from the dead and (initially blinded by bright automobile headlight) first encounters Ben, a mixture of shock and fear registering on her face. The ambiguity I wish to confront is the nature of Barbra's apparent fear. As noted all the dead are white. They are in fact initially white *men*. Reflecting their symbolic function in relation to the living

5. Largely confined to the world of male adventure, Poitier's contemporary Jim Brown would seem to offer the possibility of an alternative screen image. But their roles are often strikingly similar: Brown even plays a Poitier-like noble integrationist (as a southern town's first black sheriff) in *tick...tick...tick...* (1970). The comparative complexity and profundity of the liberal debate in the Poitier films actually becomes more apparent when viewed in light of Brown, whose inert personality is more easily put to the service of white interests, and in whose films liberalism is much more gestural. He is sometimes a much more self effacing appeaser than Poitier, as in *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) where he is a reformed criminal who dies serving America's war effort or in *Dark of the Sun* (1968) where (as a saintly, ultimately sacrificial African) he mouths some of the most damning white myths regarding the black race.

6. This article was written in 1992 and revised in 2000. Subsequent to my revision, I discovered Ed Guerrero's *Framing Blackness* (Temple University Press, 1993). Several of the points I make regarding the Poitier/blaxploitation hero opposition are developed much more fully (and with consummate insight) in Guerrero's critical study. I recommend it highly.

7. Wood, p.116

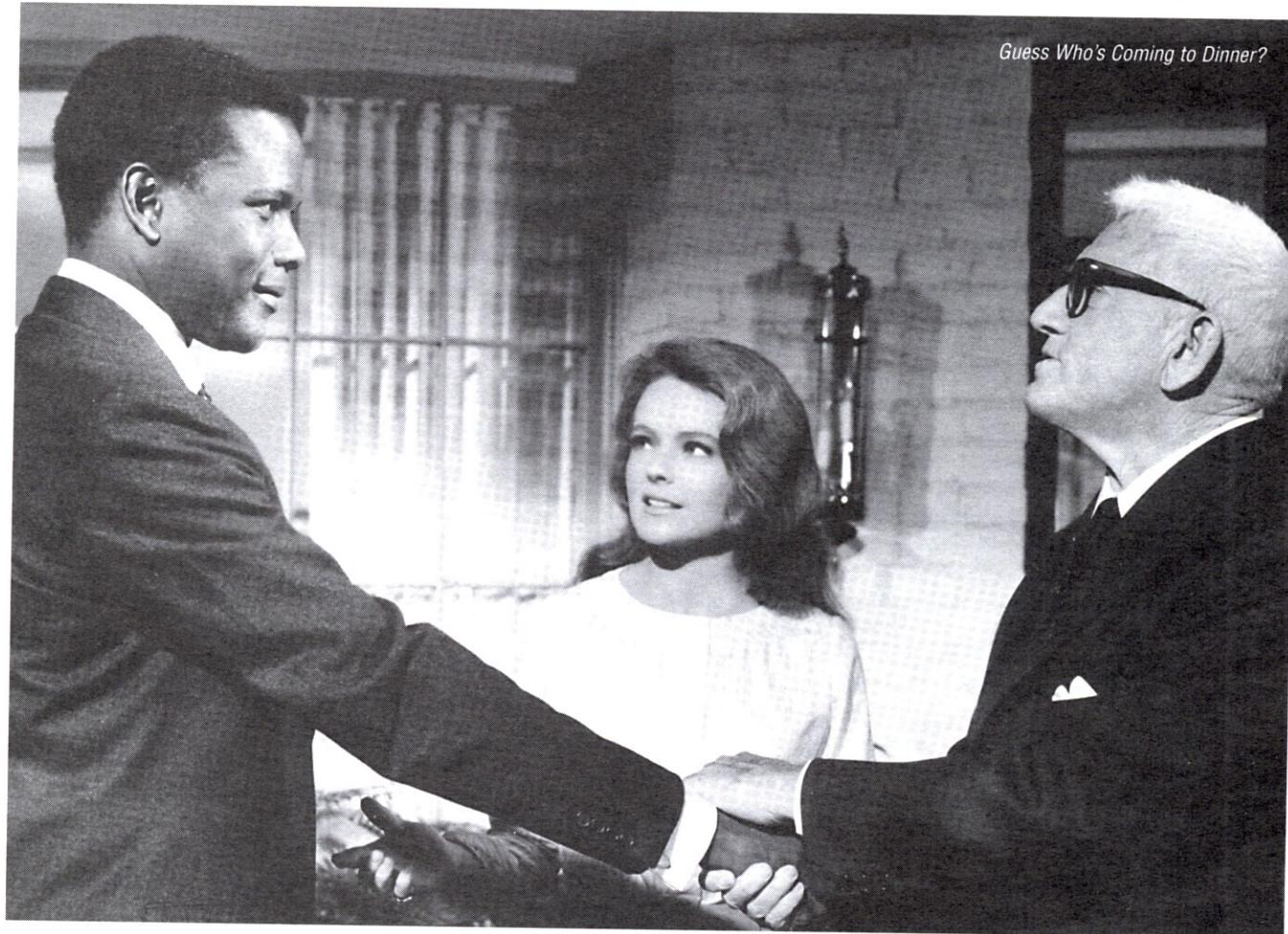
8. Sugy's description of Poitier as a 'knight errant' places Poitier within a tradition of masculine behavior that, in U.S. culture, finds its fullest realization in a particular branch of the American cowboy. Poitier's persona can thus be viewed as a manifestation of a specific cultural prototype and criticism (although this was clearly not Sugy's intent) can be generalized beyond Poitier toward cultural tendencies that quite precede this particular realization. It should be noted, however, that already in Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946) the nature of the hero's sexuality is creating narrative problems, specifically in Wyatt Earp's relationship to Clementine. Here the tradition of the hero's chastity clashes dissonantly with another narrative tradition, that of the joining of the heterosexual couple. One can question then the validity of adapting a figure, problematic even in the Western, to solve the problems of integration in late twentieth century America.

whites, female dead will first appear shortly after the emergence of the two couples from the farmhouse basement, signaling the ascension of the family and heterosexual relations as primary concerns. Also unlike the dead, Ben can drive (he has just driven up). Romero carefully places the original threatening ghoul behind Ben so Barbra's fear could be directed at *him*. We should be open to the possibility however that Barbra (product of a culture that has doubtless imbued her with stories of threatening black men) fears *Ben* and chiefly because of his race. One notes that she resists him as he takes her into the house.

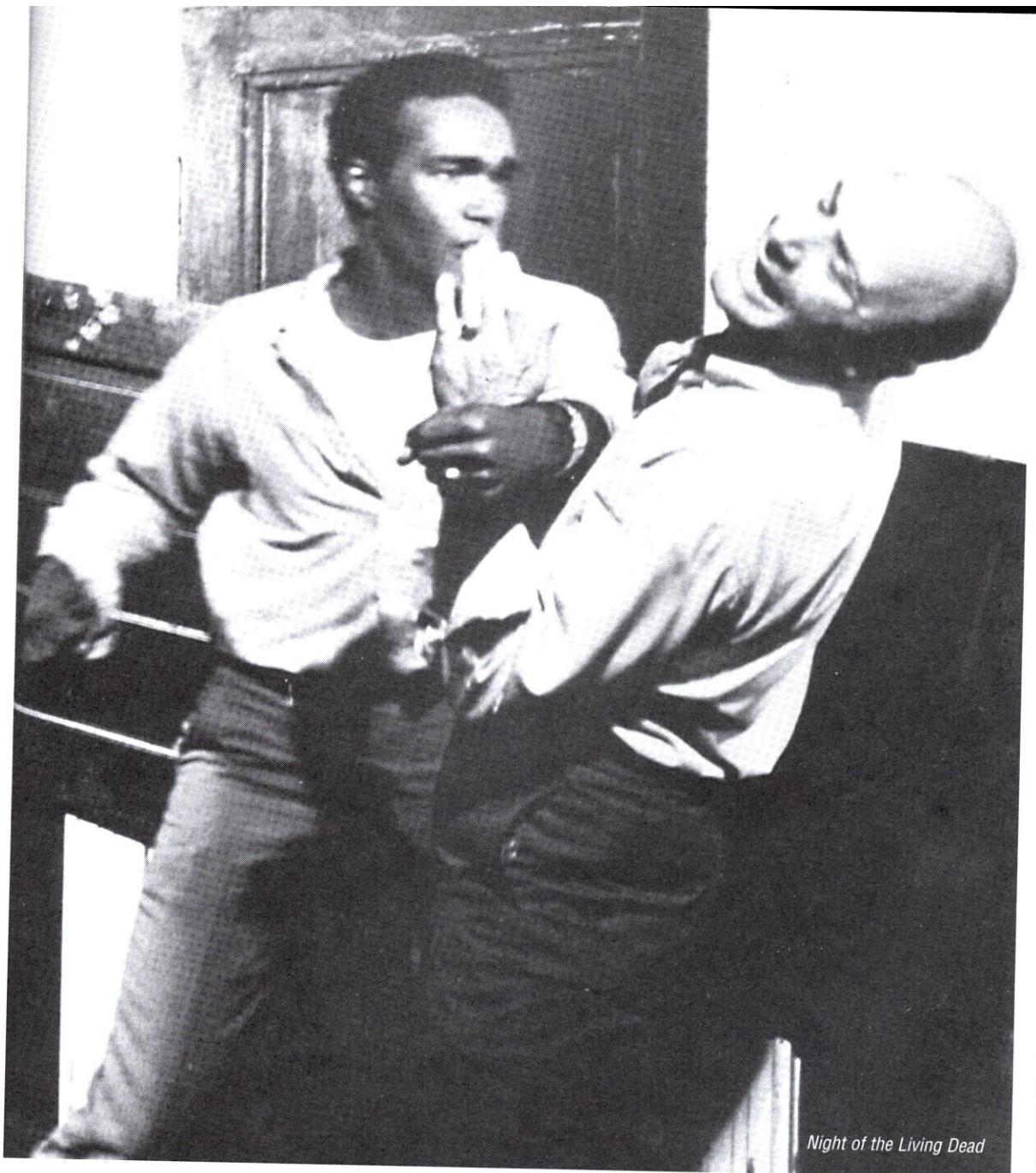
The possibility of Barbra's racial fear is further developed in those scenes showing Ben's rescue of Barbra from a ghoul that has invaded the house. We are first given the heroine lying across a chair, vulnerable, unaware of the ghoul. Ben enters, sees the ghoul and removes Barbra from its path. This is followed by a shot of Barbra turning to watch as Ben overcomes the ghoul and pierces its skull. Shortly thereafter Barbra approaches the immobile ghoul, staring dazedly at it, whereupon Ben tells her "Don't look at it!" and drags it from the house, a close up of Barbra as Ben removes the ghoul revealing her to be staring at Ben now, with what seems to be a mixture of fear and anger (her face is obscured by shadows). After Ben burns the ghoul his return indoors is punctuated with another close up of Barbra, now more clearly glowering at him. This is followed by 1) Ben recovering from the ordeal and turning on the kitchen light, telling Barbra to turn on more light, 2) Barbra by the refrigerator leaving the kitchen.

She returns a moment later having instead retrieved the knife she had earlier been carrying. She places it upon the refrigerator, the camera tracking in slightly to record this action. Again we must recognize the ambiguity of the action: does Barbra retrieve the knife to help combat the ever present threat from the dead or to protect herself from Ben, who has already proved himself a danger to other white bodies (through his killing of the ghoul)? As noted, for the film's whites the dead (on certain levels) are recognizable as normal. One can take this further by suggesting that for Barbra, Ben arouses a more immediate or equal fear to her fear of the dead (As presented, it is difficult to determine if Barbra actually witnesses the burning of the ghoul. However her alarm later as Helen Cooper lights a cigarette suggests she is aware of the burning and associates fire with potential danger to herself. As Dyer notes, by associating Ben with fire Romero might have had in mind the more topical association of blacks with the burning of big city ghettos during the 1960's).

In their relations with Ben, some unease can be discerned in all the whites but it is most obvious in the presentation of Mr. Cooper. Through this unattractive, physically unimposing, belligerent, ultimately cowardly man we are given the most privileged figure of our culture, reduced to the bare essentials of that privilege: white, male, heterosexual, father. He guards desperately two manifestations of his privilege: his titular position as head of the family (constantly imposing a discredited authority over his wife) and his role as "father" in the larger society, here unsuccessfully attempting to impose







Night of the Living Dead

his will on people of color (Ben) and white youth (Tom). What we are given in his confrontations with Ben is society's supreme authority figure confronting a figure he has been conditioned to consider a subordinate and finding the opposite. Most telling is his demand that Barbra accompany him to his basement refuge, a peculiar demand in light of his earlier refusal to respond to her panicked screams and his explicit refusal to take any responsibility for her. The social segregation of white women and black men that I mentioned earlier manifests itself even here in an attempt by Cooper to separate Ben from Barbra, a woman he cares nothing about. The portrait of American patriarchy that emerges from *Night's* white male figures (Cooper, the posse, the dead) is nowhere endorsed.

Romero's treatment of the barriers to interracial intimacy is further exposed in the scene where Ben and Barbra exchange stories of their encounters with the dead (Again the examination will be somewhat detailed, necessitated by the

fact that interpretation is so much dependent, here and elsewhere, upon the actors' expressions and Romero's direction). Having boarded up the kitchen Ben and Barbra move to the dining room. As he works Ben recounts the horrors he had witnessed in town, his vulnerability and sensitivity gradually revealed as his story progresses. Barbra responds by recounting her graveyard experiences, only now omitting Johnny's death, a reflection of both her mental state and her guilt for insisting upon the cemetery visit. At the second mention of Johnny, Romero cuts to Ben, who now glowers at Barbra (she at this time has not identified Johnny as her brother). As she speaks, her emotions overwhelm her and her gestures take on an unintentionally erotic quality (opening her coat, grabbing her breasts), Romero at one point cutting to Ben, who now looks annoyed. Rising to continue his work, Ben (in response to her evident hysteria) suggest she calm down but it is evident that he too is barely in control. When Barbra, clearly irrational, insists that they "rescue" Johnny, Ben responds

with stony silence. When she attempts to leave the house he impedes her escape. She responds by slapping him. He responds by punching her, knocking her unconscious.

Ben and Barbra provide each other a mutual opportunity for emotional release: the shared stories suggest a desperate human need for communication and sympathy brought on by the dire circumstances. But in a culture that frowns upon such contact between white women and black men, these needs are likely to be tempered by fear. We learn nothing of Ben's background but it's entirely likely that as a black American male a very real fear of reprisal for transgressing against social laws has been internalized. This is a possible explanation for Ben's annoyance at Barbra's erotic actions, the possibility that it results from fear of his own erotic response. Again, we should remember that Ben is the median between two eras: the Poitier era with its (largely implied) sexual restrictions and the blaxploitation era with its hero who dares to desire white women. Ben's emotional state is beautifully summed up at the scene's conclusion when he lays the unconscious Barbra tenderly upon the couch then opens her coat, cautiously, as if afraid to touch her.

If Romero's subject is the impediments to interracial intimacy, then Ben's behavior is open to additional interpretations. If he desires Barbra, this is countered by other emotions: unaware he is Barbra's brother, Ben's glowering stare at the mention of Johnny's name (and his subsequent withdrawal into his work) suggests sexual jealousy. Ben's potential possessiveness is already suggested in his first encounter with Barbra when he grabs her and takes her into the house (she could be a ghoul). His reactions to Harry Cooper ("Keep your hands off her!") suggest possessiveness as much as protection. And if Cooper makes emblematic use of Barbra what of Ben's possessiveness (white woman as emblem of white male privilege, Cooper attempting to retain it by taking her to the basement, Ben to subvert or acquire it, a battle to which Barbra's catatonic state seems the appropriate response)? One can certainly blame Ben for Barbra's withdrawal. If some response is provoked by her slap (clearly from Ben's position, the slap reduces him to the position of a subordinate), knocking her unconscious seems extreme and betrays a temporary loss of control. Romero presents the human needs of the potentially radical couple as everywhere hampered by the cultural baggage of the past: racial bigotry and masculine domination and possessiveness.

Romero and Griffith

A view of Ben and Barbra as a potentially transgressive couple under siege by the repressive forces of the past (their deeply internalized power symbolized by the dead) should be clearer now. Ironically, in light of the fact that he is indisputably *Night's* hero, Ben is for the white characters the film's most disruptive monster, sharing two characteristics with many Classical Hollywood film monsters: not only does he generate more audience sympathy than almost any other character ("The monster" in Whale's *Frankenstein* films is exemplary) but he represents qualities both personal (chiefly Ben's energy and intelligence) and political (collective action, black power) that patriarchal capitalist society must eliminate if it is to continue unobstructed.

Behind the difficulty of a Ben/Barbra alliance as well as the ambiguities of Poitier's sexual reticence lies the oppressive

history of the sexual segregation of black men and white women in America. Historically, the imposition of various forms of social and political controls upon the black community has been justified (implicitly or explicitly) by a desire to segregate black men from white women, the most violent control being lynching. It is to this history that Romero refers through the killing of Ben, which is in effect a symbolic lynching. The history of the lynching of black men is so repressed in American culture (even Romero can only render it in symbolic terms) that even in those films that protest against the practice (*They Won't Forget*, *The Oxbow Incident*) the victims are non-black. It seems appropriate that *Night* refers us to Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, one of the few films to render the lynching of black men, although from the polar opposite political position. The same synopsis serves for both: segments of the U.S. are thrown into chaos by a hitherto subdued interior force (in *Birth* the newly freed slaves, guided by corrupt northerners, in *Night* the arisen dead) as well as a breakdown in sympathetic communication with the seat of centralized national power, Washington D.C. (The death of Lincoln—"The Great Heart"—and the attainment of power by Stoneman in *Birth*, the clamp down on information by the feds in *Night* as exemplified by a cabinet member's censure of a talkative scientist). Order is restored in both by a rural, fascist organization (in *Birth*, based in the South. I would suggest the connotations of "southernness" are carried over into *Night* through the sheriff, leader of the posse, whose accent contrasts markedly with the other characters). In each this involves the elimination or repression of a disruptive black presence⁹. The overt fascism of *Birth* becomes the symbolic fascism of *Night*, the intertextual link confirmed by the use of a specific symbol: the Klan emblem (seen in various forms, from a white cross within a black circle to a white bordered black cross within a black circle) which heralded the triumphant repression of rebellious blacks in *Birth* is also on the cloth used (with bitter irony) to light the bonfire that burns Ben's body in *Night*.¹⁰

Robert K. Lightning writes about film, and lives and works in New York.

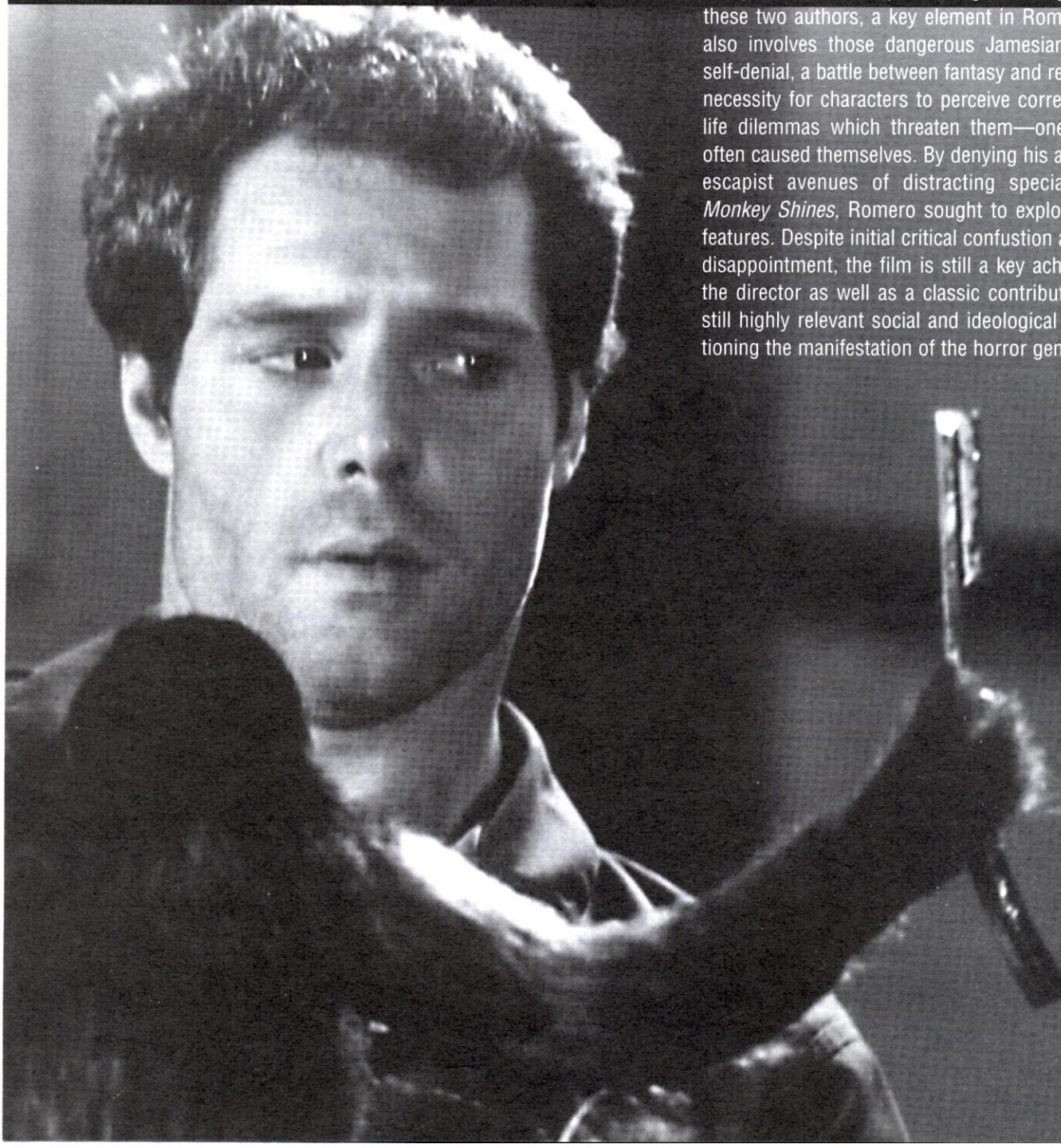
9. This particular narrative paradigm as well as the motif of the isolated group under siege have a significance beyond these two films. Most obviously they are familiar from the Western (Griffith's influence on the Western is a critical commonplace). In fact, one particular western Ford's *Sgt. Rutledge* (1960) can be viewed as a median between Griffith and Romero, replicating themes and motifs that originate in *Birth* but reversing the film's anti-black politics (applying them instead to Native Americans). As with the Griffith, however, I would argue the Ford's direct influence upon Romero. The first encounter of the black hero and white heroine (and the subsequent scenes of the isolated interracial couple) in both films are strikingly similar. In both films, due to the ambiguousness of the exposition, the hero appears momentarily as a potential threat, both directors cunningly exploiting the American racial myth of the threatening black man, only to dissipate tension in the ensuing drama.

10. The lynching motif extends beyond the actions of the posse, and this excerpt from James R. McGovern's case study of a lynching *Anatomy of a Lynching* (Louisiana State University Press, 1982) bolsters the parallels Romero draws between living, dead and the posse in *Night*, in language that strikingly recalls Romero's film.

"Erich Fromm, in a somewhat similar vein, has emphasized the joylessness of the societies which exploit groups in their midst since they coerce conformity and thwart normal expression and hence generate destructiveness. Persons so governed by taboos and traditions resemble zombies, and their societies, psychically speaking, valleys of the Dead. Lynching or the tearing apart of bodies, reliably reveal their morbid personalities and pre-occupations and, at the same time, provide lurid sensationalism which contributes to their illusion of being alive"(p.9).

Monkey Shines

by **Tony Williams**

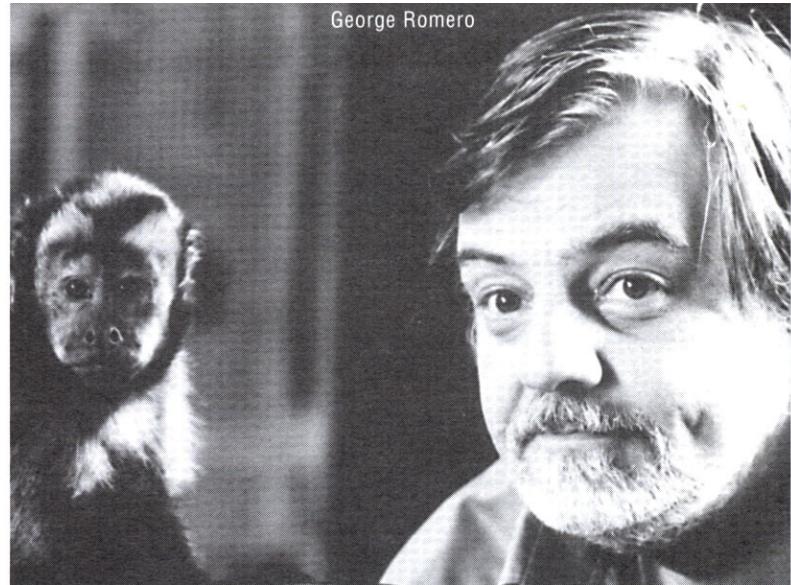


The cinema of George A. Romero is popularity associated with gore, special effects, and zombies. Although the "living dead" trilogy brought the director world renown, it also trapped him in a one-dimensional interpretive framework. Despite the dubious acclaim of "father of the modern American (splatter) horror film," George Romero's films are more complex in nature. They often involve the roles of individuals who either actively deny what occurs before their very eyes or uncomfortably comply with whatever form the dominant social ideology takes at the particular time. Denial is often a key feature in Romero's cinema and *Monkey Shines* emphasizes this feature, one often ignored by those audience members seeking only the dubious pleasures of special effects. When in college Romero read Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*, a novella he has always wanted to adapt. Although a vast gulf separates these two authors, a key element in Romero's cinema also involves those dangerous Jamesian features of self-denial, a battle between fantasy and reality, and the necessity for characters to perceive correctly the real-life dilemmas which threaten them—ones they have often caused themselves. By denying his audiences the escapist avenues of distracting special effects in *Monkey Shines*, Romero sought to explore the above features. Despite initial critical confusion and audience disappointment, the film is still a key achievement for the director as well as a classic contribution to those still highly relevant social and ideological roots conditioning the manifestation of the horror genre itself.

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Partly due to financial and industrial problems resulting in compromises affecting the final version of *Day of the Dead*, George Romero officially ended his involvement with Laurel Entertainment.¹ He now wished freedom to pursue other projects. Although Romero maintained his base in Pittsburgh, he still hoped for that optimistic union between his mode of independent filmmaking and Hollywood industrial support. *Monkey Shines* is the product of this ideal. Financed by a major studio (Orion) but shot in Pittsburgh with the involvement of as many of his creative team possible, the film also represents his first major literary adaptation. Michael Stewart's original novel was set in Oxford, England. But Romero transfers the setting to Pittsburgh. The film appears to represent a radical change for the director both stylistically and thematically. On a first viewing, it initially appears to be the unfortunate product of compromise. *Monkey Shines* seems to lack the type of visual style and thematic concerns present in Romero's other films. During pre- and post-production phases, Romero experienced several examples of creative frustration. Despite Christine Forrest's abilities as an actress, the studio insisted that she test for the role of Nurse Maryanne Hodges before they would accept her. Also, after previews, Orion added a last-minute gratuitous shock ending combining the already shopworn audience scare tactics seen in *Carrie* (1976) and *Alien* (1979) which jarred with the director's type of more subtle climax. The studio also insisted on a traditional happy ending to replace Romero's more ambiguous and ironic conclusion. Naturally, *Monkey Shines* did not attract the same degree of critical and popular acclaim surrounding other Romero films on their first release.

With these factors in mind, it would be natural to dismiss *Monkey Shines* as one of Romero's failed works deserving little attention. However, although *Monkey Shines* fails to reach the creative levels of *Night*, *The Crazies*, *Dawn*, and *Day*, it is by no means a total failure. Despite the compromises affecting its production, the film has several points of interest both in terms of the cultural concepts influencing Romero as well as parallels to his authorship concerns elsewhere. In many ways, *Monkey Shines* resembles *There's Always Vanilla* as a compromised work. While the latter film represented the Latent Image's attempt to "go Hollywood," it also exhibited many traces of the director's future concerns. Stylistically, *Monkey Shines* lacks the exciting rawness and dynamism of Romero's brand of low-budget filmmaking. It superficially appears to resemble an average Hollywood production. But, on the other hand, it contains many key Romero themes and its more intuitive employment of acting and direction deserves further investigation. Like many other Romero films, the important



George Romero

elements appear indirectly within the text awaiting excavation by discerning viewers who move beyond the superficial mechanisms of gore and thrills to penetrate the real causes motivating such excessive displays. In an era dominated by the *Friday the 13th* and *Nightmare of Elm Street* series, *Monkey Shines* was doomed to failure if Orion regarded it as a rival to such gratuitously popular competitors. But, based on an understated, underrated novel², *Monkey Shines* actually operates on much more subtle levels, levels which would appeal to a director hailed for introducing new, explicit levels into the horror genre but more interested in other more mature and subtle levels of exploration. Careful attention to the film reveals an extremely ambiguous and complex work both in terms of the creative screenwriting Romero employs as well as his masterful direction of acting performances. *Monkey Shines* is a film containing much more than meets the eye. It is a work in which the plot operates as a mere device for the director to engage in further explorations of the human condition. As with gore and zombies in Romero's other films, the device of a murderous monkey is really equivalent to Hitchcock's "MacGuffin." Other important things are going on in *Monkey Shines*.

Although lacking naturalism's stylistic features, *Monkey Shines* does have several parallels to one of the genre's major premises, namely, the thin division between savagery and civilization characteristic of late nineteenth and early twentieth century literature. Like Jacques Lantier in Zola's *La Bete Humaine* and Frank Norris's *McTeague*, Allan Mann (Jason Beghe) has to struggle with atavistic feelings. His subconscious feelings of resentment emerge in anger against his betrayers and a mother who wishes to keep him in a state of infantile dependence. Although many of Zola's unfortunate Lantier family often succumb to the curse of hereditary degeneracy exacerbated by malign environmental influences, Allan Mann's dilemma is more the result of those conditioned civilized instinctual patterns of behavior motivating Romero's zombies and human characters. For most of *Monkey Shines*, the audience believes the collision with a truck "explains" Allan's quadriplegic condition. However, half way through the film, Dr. Williams (William Newman) suggests that a "congenital problem" may really have caused his condition. "The accident could have been just a tragic coinci-

1. For further information see Gagne, *The Zombies That Ate Pittsburgh*, New York, Dodd, Mead & CO., 1987, pp. 147-170.

2. According to Kim Newman, Romero was also interested in adapting *Mummy's Boys* by British writer Bernard Taylor during this period. See Kim Newman, "Monkey Shines," *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 57, 673 (1990): 46.

dence." This scene follows two significant associated movements in the screenplay. When Allan's mother Dorothy (Joyce Van Pattern) announces her intention of giving up her independent existence to move in and "mother" him as before, her son's hand briefly moves. When Allan excitedly points out to her this sign of his possible improvement, Dorothy denies it and complains instead about his behavior towards her. She refuses to recognize that her son's irritation results from his resentment at her wish to dominate and make him dependent upon her as in infancy. In the next scene, Allan expresses his fear of capuchin monkey Ella whom he will later blame for subsequent murderous events. Like his mother, he denies several unpleasant facts in his life and conveniently places the blame elsewhere upon a convenient scapegoat in a manner paralleling the denial mechanisms employed by the main characters of *Vanilla and Jack's Wife*. As with other figures in Romero's other films, Allan of *Monkey Shines* is not totally admirable. He is a complex individual with several negative features buried within his own personality which he refuses to come to terms with. As a result, *Monkey Shines* is a much more ambiguous film beneath the surface. Romero directs Jason Beghe's Allan so that he depicts several complex layers of human behavior ranging from a character attracting audience sympathy due to his condition to an angry profane white male who manipulates others emotionally. Despite the studio's attempt to find an easy explanation by blaming Ella, Romero's screenplay and direction suggests other more ambiguous levels of meaning. Although the visual style of *Monkey Shines* appears to differ from Romero's more independently conceived works, its characters and content are not entirely divorced from previous concerns. Like many characters in Romero's other films, the leading players in *Monkey Shines* are complex figures exhibiting contradictory tendencies who often engage in aspects of duplicity and self-deception threatening their entire personalities.

After a studio disclaimer concerning the treatment of capuchin monkeys used in Boston University's program to help the disabled, *Monkey Shines* opens with a tranquil image of Allan's house. As the credits roll, the camera slowly moves right to zoom towards the upper window in a manner resembling the opening sequence of *Psycho*. Like Hitchcock's film, this opening shot suggests that the future horrific events of Romero's film are somehow connected with a character we will soon see. The scene changes to an interior view as Allan moves into the frame from below appearing in a mid close-up as he awakens. Next, the camera moves slowly right to show his sleeping girlfriend Linda Aikman (Janine Turner) at his side before zooming out to frame them both in mid-shot. As he demurely covers her nude body with the sheet, he whispers his intention of going for a morning run. The next shot shows him exercising nude in another room before he raises

the outside blinds and looks outside. Before the beginning of David Shire's lyrical music, Romero shows Allan's hands putting bricks into his backpack prior to his morning run.

These opening shots are not superfluous to the following narrative. They suggest several things about Allan and his relationship to Billy of *Knighttriders*. Like Billy, Allan is a perfectionist and takes pleasure in his physical prowess. However, Romero subtly suggests that his hero has certain unwholesome features in his personality he is unaware of. Although Allan is not living in a medieval fantasy outside society like Billy, he is wholeheartedly committed to a pursuit of perfection into which he channels his whole energies. Allan follows two demanding paths of being a law student as well as a college athlete, either of which would ordinarily tax the energies of any individual. Rather than remaining in bed with Linda, he decides to go out for an early morning run. His desires have masochistic undertones. While Billy exhibits these features by flagellating himself ritually every morning, Allan puts heavy bricks into his backpack. He thus makes a run which ought to be a pleasurable exercise more of a punishing ritual. Although the audience gains little explicit information about Billy's real motivations in these opening scenes, it does receive certain suggestive information warning them not to identify with *Monkey Shines* nominal hero but rather to engage in objective observation and analyze particular features motivating his character.

As Allan runs through the peaceful streets a series of shots alternate between objective views of him running before the camera and his subjective perceptions of the people he sees. Romero also films his running feet making him appear like a Pegasus figure following the novel's description of its nominal hero. However, as Allan runs further, a sudden subjective shot shows the presence of a large dog looming before a gate, its restraining leash hidden by the bushes. It lunges forward causing Allan to collide with a truck. A slow-motion low angle shot shows Allan flying in air ironically attaining his Pegasus ideal before the succeeding image reveals bricks from his backpack disintegrating on the ground—an apt metaphor for his disabling injuries. Again, these images foreshadow others which will occur later in the film involving alternation between objective and subjective perception as well as the atavistic motifs contained in the screenplay. Significantly, the dog appears to be running wild. However, both the audience and Allan see that it is restrained by a leash similar to the leash binding Ella's body in certain scenes of the film.

The next sequence shows the hospital operating room. Individual shots reveal a monitor and respirator before showing Allan on the operating table before the camera pans left to show the operating theater staff. Allan's body is now regarded as little better than a piece of human machinery which Dr. John Wiseman (Stanley Tucci) crudely rejoices over as something he can exhibit his egotistic sense of authority





over. His repugnant manner reveals itself in the opening lines following a nurse's affirmative comment concerning Allan's unconscious position on the operating table once the anaesthetic takes effect. "Good. Then we can talk about him. Martha. His ass is even hairier than yours." After ending the sequence with the surgeon's knife beginning the operation, the next scene silently and poignantly reveals the tragic circumstances surrounding Allan's new position in life. Like the silent but meaningful introductory sequence in Hawks's *Rio Bravo*, Romero opens with a close-up of a black and white photo of Allan in his athletic prime winning a race. The camera then pans slowly right to reveal a Roadrunner cartoon Get-Well-Card, a color photo of Allan, Geoff, Linda, and Coach Charlie Cunningham, a single photo of Linda, and

other "Get Well Cards." Then the camera passes a table containing Allan's medication, and finally halts at a close-up of a now bearded Allan immobile in bed fully conscious of his new situation. Romero visually conveys Allan's feelings in a camera movement also reminiscent of Jean-Luc Godard's cinematic examples of montage in "mise-en-scene."³ He then lap-dissolves from Alan's face to show Wiseman's car arriving outside Alan's house. Although this appears to be a natural cinematic transition from one scene to another, Romero's rare use of this technique in *Monkey Shines* (as well as most of

3. For this relationship to Godard's films such as *Weekend*, see Brian Henderson, "Towards A Non-Bourgeois Camera Style," *Film Quarterly* 24.2 (1970/71): 2-14.



his other films) suggests some implicit connection between Allan's condition and the responsibility of the surgeon, a connection which later events will affirm. A lap-dissolve also significantly occurs later in the film after Allan has phoned Linda's house and discovered Wiseman's presence there. The lap dissolve changes from the embrace of Linda and Wiseman to a close-up of Allan's angry face.

Dorothy sees Wiseman arrive and rushes to greet him at the door. She appears overjoyed at his arrival as if expressing pleasure at the presence of a man who has put her son in a dependent condition. She eagerly introduces him to everyone at the welcome party as "Dr. John Wiseman, the genius who saved my Allan's life." However, Allan's law professor Dr. Esther Fry (Tudi Wiggins) rejects Dorothy's fascination with institutional titles and insists on being addressed by her first name only. Unlike Dorothy, she is also concerned about Allan's progress towards some form of independence and asks Wiseman as to whether he will be able to continue his studies. Wiseman replies, "Physically yes. The question is *will* he want to." His answer also emphasizes the main emphasis of *Monkey Shines*, namely its focus on human consciousness and related responsibility. After meeting Charley Cunningham (Tom Quinn) whose hesitation ("I'm....I was Allan's coach") he does nothing to contradict, Wiseman asks Linda "How you're holding up?" Her guilt-ridden reticence together with the penetrating nature of his question leads her to go to Allan's bathroom and clear away her personal things. Tensions are clearly in the air prior to Allan's arrival. They are clearly evident in the meaningful, but understated, performances directed by Romero and professionally delivered by his actors.

When Allan arrives, Dorothy overenthusiastically utters the toast, "To Allan, to the start of his new life." Linda belatedly arrives and places her nightbag containing personal posses-

sions unobtrusively in the corner before guiltily rushing up and kissing him. "I should have come to visit you more often at the hospital. I'm sorry." Recognizing the strain on Linda, Wiseman complicitly removes her from the scene by asking her to get him a large whisky for Allan which he has medically "prescribed." Wiseman manipulates this tense situation in several ways. He wishes to deflect Allan's attention from losing his girlfriend by getting him intoxicated. Wiseman also dominates Linda in the same supercilious manner he used towards a conscientious nurse in the earlier operating room sequence. When Linda goes to the kitchen, she drinks some of Allan's whisky before hired nurse Maryanne Hodges (Christine Forrest) appears on the scene to take control of the situation. She removes the glass from Linda's hand, pours the contents into a plastic container, refuses the use of ice cubes, and dilutes the whisky with tap water. Wishing to remove herself from an embarrassing situation, the distraught Linda tries to phones Allan's friend, Geoffrey Fisher (John Pankow), a researcher in craniology, who is absent from his office.

These masterfully underplayed performances in the film's third sequence aptly suggest tensions which will explicitly emerge into violent manifestations later. They also reveal Romero's competent and intuitive control of acting performances which are often neglected by audiences who prefer more "gory" effects rather than complex acting. Without explicitly spelling out meanings, the various characters in this welcome-home sequence reveal many hidden sides of their motivations. Dorothy seems to relish the celebration much more than any grieving mother should. Wiseman appears uneasy at his requested presence. So does Linda in her role as obligatory grieving girlfriend. When Allan arrives, he puts on a brave face for his new role as quadriplegic but it is unnatural suggesting deep frustration and unhappiness. Wiseman "prescribes" a large whisky for Allan which

Maryanne immediately modifies ("and if we use alcohol we water it down"). Maryanne's character immediately exercises the type of control that Allan soon negatively reacts against. Most of the characters take advantage of his vulnerable position to dominate him in one way or another. Despite the superficial veneer of a homecoming party, Romero suggests that the actual event is not really positive and that dark repressed tensions exist below the surface.

The next sequence shows Geoffrey arriving at his laboratory with a container holding a human brain from a Jane Doe donor who died on the operating table. As he enters his laboratory containing capuchin monkeys, he switches from the red light to normal fluorescent illumination as he shows his prize to his favorite female monkey "Number Six." After injecting himself with a drug to ward off sleep, he slices off portions of the brain before boiling it in a solution and eventually injecting a dose into "Number Six." Geoff aims to increase her intelligence in his experiments. The sequence appears straightforward in nature. But, like the previous party scenes, many disturbing factors appear here. Despite his seemingly harmless appearance, Geoff has much in common with Dr. Logan of *Day*. Both men are exclusively devoted to their work and show no real understanding of the broader consequences of their experiments in terms of the effect on others. Secondly, while Rhodes nicknamed Logan "Frankenstein" in *Day*, Geoff is also a similar figure. Rather than the Gothic laboratory of the Universal films, Geoff inhabits an antiseptic laboratory flooded by white fluorescent light. However, his clinical environment is by no means devoid of the satanic associations connected with scientific experiments in earlier films such as *Metropolis* (1926) and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). Before Geoff switches the fluorescent lights on, his laboratory is immersed in somber red safety lighting making it more reminiscent of a hellish environment than a modern clinical area. Also, when Geoff mixes the brain in his chemical solution, he utters the witch chorus from *Macbeth*—"Double, double, toil and trouble. Fire burn and cauldron bubble." Unlike the witches who stimulate Macbeth's ambitious desires by acting as outside agents who, nevertheless, know their victim better than he knows himself in the earlier part of the play, Geoff knowingly nurtures his own ambitions for scientific achievement. But his objective scientific activities are as deadly as the witches' brew in *Macbeth*. He is also a Dr. Frankenstein who will also create a bride of Frankenstein for a friend who will use the "bride" as an agent to activate his own unrepressed desires in the same way as Colin Clive uses Boris Karloff in James Whale's 1931 film. Also, another reference to *Frankenstein* appears in Romero's reference to the human brain. Like the brain in the original film, Geoff's specimen has "no apparent abnormality." However, unlike the hunchback (Dwight Frye) in *Frankenstein*, Geoff does not damage it. Romero thus avoids the flawed rational scientific explanation which mars Whale's film. He intends to show that Ella's activities really emerge from Allan's "dark half." Unlike Karloff's creature, Ella is the result of a successful, not an accidental, experiment.

When Geoff plays his answer machine he belatedly receives Linda's message and arrives later in the evening when Allan is in bed. Announcing his presence by tapping on the window and using the key he had when he lodged with Allan, Geoff walks through the house which contains poignant reminders of his friend's past and present condition. On the wall are travel posters of places Allan will never visit again such as Jamaica and Barbados. A point of view shot reveals Geoff's perspective of the winch in his friend's bathroom. During the following dialogue, Allan reveals two items which suggests his deep resentment. Allan feels economically

dependent on Dorothy who has provided money for the home facilities. Despite knowing the real facts concerning his friend's inability to ever pay off the debts, Geoff remarks, "Don't worry. You'll pay her back. Lawyers get rich" without dwelling on the fact that there are very few rich successful quadriplegic lawyers. Allan also reveals his knowledge of Linda's alienation from him despite the fact that "She didn't say anything." When Geoff responds, "If she walks out on you now, fuck her", Allan replies poignantly, "I can't." His feelings of impotence, sexual jealousy, and revenge will later emerge when he has both the relevant *will* and means at his disposal to achieve his goals.

Allan also harbors deep feelings of resentment against his mother since early childhood. During the next scene, Dorothy runs a home movie despite Allan's lack of interest. It shows him playing in a back yard with other children. However, an ominous note sounds when Dorothy reminds Allan that the Patterson family who rented their Chicago Lake Side adjoining property moved away and that Allan blamed her for their departure. Allan obviously missed the only companions he had in his youth. Unlike the novel, nothing is ever mentioned about Allan's father. He seems to have expressed resentment against his mother from an early age. When Dorothy mentions Allan blaming her for the Patterson family's departure, Maryanne's budgie "Bogie" suddenly flies into the room and flaps over him in a manner reminiscent of the winged representatives of repressed violent desires in Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1961). Although "Bogie" does not have the same associations that Ella will later have for him, the bird's appearance at that particular moment suggestively represent Allan's repressed embodiment of aggressive feelings towards Dorothy in the same way as Hitchcock's winged avatars represent Lydia Brenner's resentment towards Melanie Daniels. This will not be the first time in *Monkey Shines* that a human being will use an animal to express feelings of resentment and deny that very form of manipulation.

The next scene in the home movie shows young Allan refusing to wear the Halloween costume Dorothy has purchased for him. He looks resentfully towards the camera expressing his irritation. Allan comments, "I always wanted to be Robbie the Robot. Guess, I finally got my wish." Romero's reference to *Forbidden Planet* (1956) and its "monster from the id" theme is not accidental as succeeding events reveal.

Geoff also faces his own form of pressure. After chasing away animal rights activists spraypainting the outside walls, he faces his departmental head, Dean Burbage (Stephen Root), a threatening administrator who relishes appearing on talk shows (Romero's favorite media bogey) to promote vivisection. Burbage also regards medical science in the university as another institutional arm of capitalism. Burbage wishes his subordinate to provide "results." When Geoff attempts to argue with Burbage on his own ideological terms, "It's not costing anything," his tormenter beats him at a game he knows only too well. Burbage replies, "It's costing time, Geoffrey. I don't want to fire you. I just want you to produce." Burbage also snoops into Geoff's lab, wishing to discover his results, and claim it as his own work similar to the activities of certain senior academics who exploit their graduate students. As in "The Crate" episode of *Creepshow*, the world of higher education is a negative institutional environment. Later, Burbage describes himself as a "realist", rather than Geoff's more accurate description of "sadist." As Geoff views in horror Burbage's malignant experiment with a drowning rat, the latter comments "By the carrot or by the stick. I prefer the stick. It's close to what we experience in real life." Little difference exists between Burbage and Logan of *Day*.

Although the latter believes in rewarding his zombies who show "civility", his tape recording reveals that punitive methods are also involved in his methods.

These encounters set in force a chain of circumstances which will eventually lead to disaster. Geoff feels pressured to increase Number Six's dosage. "You should be playing chess with the dosage you get. My ass is on the line. So is yours. It has to work. You're half human. Why don't you show something for Christ's sake." Allan's later attempt at suicide leads him to remove the monkey from its other less-developed companions and give it the human stimulus it needs, one which is beneficial neither to animal or human. Despite his supposedly offering Number Six the "carrot" of Allan's human contact, Burbage's "stick" philosophy also motivates his actions.

Geoff injects the monkey with serum attempting to make it more human. Ironically, he believes that it will benefit all concerned. Unfortunately, like the scientists in *The Crazies* and *Day*, he is so closely bound up in his work that he does not realize that human civilization is really a mixed blessing and not really something to be emulated in its present form. Even the unscrupulous Wiseman (who has by now appropriated Linda) recognizes that civilized human family life has its dangers when he argues against Dorothy's postponing her return to Illinois. He sees it as harmful for both herself and her son. "I think you might be aggravating the situation. Go back home. Go back to your business." But he also dismisses Geoff's concern over Allan by brusquely commenting that "six out of ten quadriplegics attempt suicide at one point or another," before walking away with Linda and leaving Allan to his fate. Geoff then decides to enlist the aid of animal trainer, Melanie Parker (Kate McNeil) ostensibly to help his friend as a household friend for the disabled but also to continue his experiments unethically from afar. Like many characters in *Monkey Shines*, Geoff's motivations appear ambivalent. It is extremely difficult to decide which one really dominates his mind. Does he really want to help his friend? Or use him for a scientific experiment? Both factors may compete with one another so that any certainty is difficult. Dorothy definitely wants to look after her son. But she also desires to dominate him. Allan later becomes a human battleground torn by conscious attempts to control dark desires. However, he also unconsciously enjoys the release of unrepressed violent energies channelled against those he hates.

Monkey Shines is really a complex film dealing with the ambiguous nature of human motivations. Such motivations exist within the personalities of people unable to deal directly with the consequences and responsibilities of human desires and energies. It is a feature common to *Vanilla*, *The Crazies*, *Jack's Wife, Martin*, and the zombie trilogy.

Despite Maryanne's irritation, Geoff and Melanie introduce Number Six (now named Ella) to Allan's home. Ella and her human master eventually form a close bond to one another so much so that Allan comments "She does so much for me. She seems to want to do things for me." However, this is Allan's perception. Although the audience may fall into the trap of reading the Frankenstein "damaged brain" explanation into *Monkey Shines* like the scientific explanation in *Night*, other explanations are equally possible. Despite her booster shots, Ella may not be acting independently but really serving Allan's desires to the same extent as the zombies in Romero's trilogy enact basic human instincts their supposedly deceased status appears to deny. Later, Allan significantly recognizes that Ella is also "part" of him.

During the opening scenes of *Monkey Shines*, Allan engaged in a masochistically punitive system of training. Now no

longer able to channel his negative energies into athletic pursuits, he transmits them against his nurse Maryanne. Although Maryanne resembles Billie of *Creepshow* with her non-appealing personality, the audience has no evidence to believe that she is as culpable as Allan believes her to be. With the exception of figures such as Captain Rhodes of *Day*, Romero's fictional characters are very rarely one-dimensional. Naturally, Maryanne does not like her job. She sits around most of the time due to Ella now taking over most of her duties and becomes irritated at her client's negative behavior resulting from his resented immobility. "I'm sick and tired of your insults." But these factors do not really justify the way Allan treats her. He blames Maryanne for the lack of hygiene and dismisses her complaint that Ella is really responsible for the state of his house. However, when Allan shouts "We get pissed off," Maryanne immediately suspects some negative intonations concerning his use of the plural tense. She intuitively responds, "It's unnatural! You and that monkey." After "Bogie" flaps over Allan's face and appears to nearly peck out his eye (an action foreshadowing Ella's later use of the syringe over Melanie's immobile body), Ella later disposes of the offending object at night. Undoubtedly, she performs Allan's desired wish as Maryanne recognizes when she blames him before Dorothy for "Bogie's" demise. "You killed my Bogie..Not with his hands. He had his little demon do it. You did it. The two of you together." Maryanne significantly terms Ella a "demon." It is almost as if she intuitively understands that the monkey resembles a familiar spirit of one of the witches in *Macbeth*. When Allan sarcastically rages against Maryanne concerning the reasons for her beloved pet's death—"Who gives a shit? It deserved to die"—his unrepressed anger both certainly affirms Maryanne's suspicions as well as suggesting to the audience that Ella may not have acted on her own.

At the same time, Dorothy returns after deciding to sell her home and business to move in with Allan. Already feeling embarrassed at Dorothy taking over Maryanne's task by bathing him as if he were still a little child, Allan learns about a female conspiracy. This revelation further fuels his angry feelings concerning his resented dependence upon others. Dorothy informs him that Maryanne gave notice of quitting a week before. Mother immediately decided to devote herself exclusively to Allan without informing him of this change and allowing him the possibility of making other plans. When Dorothy puts Allan to bed she exhibits pleasure at dominating her son once again by commenting "I'll be here when you need me." However, his hand suddenly moves in reaction to his feelings of angry dependency. Although she never sees the movement, Dorothy perversely refuses to acknowledge any sign of her son's recovery and encourage him to leave his dependent condition. "Your hand did not move. It cannot move." She then provokes Allan's angry outburst and refuses to acknowledge its real causes by retreating into her closed world of genteel civility. "I don't like how you're behaving. I don't like it at all." Significantly, Allan experiences his first vision of moving outside the house in Ella's body that very same night. Romero conveys this to the audience by using a low-angle, Steadicam subjective shot from the perspective of a monkey. This shot complements the earlier credit Steadicam objective shot of Allan's feet running before the camera. It suggests a deep symbiotic relationship between master and animal servant parallel to that existing in *Frankenstein* (1931).

Like many Romero characters, Allan is torn by conflicting desires which he can never really overcome. When Geoff complicity examines the attic and finds evidence of Ella's nightly excursions he denies this in his desire to continue

using his friend for his own ends. Allan now becomes afraid of Ella and wishes her removal. However, he conveniently displaces his fears on to a surrogate object and blames Ella. This resembles the very same manner that Colin Clive's Dr. Frankenstein abandons and blames a creature whose creation he was directly responsible for in Whale's 1931 film. Allan expresses his fears to Geoff and Melanie. "It's like I was in Ella's body, running with her strength, seeing through her eyes. I'm part of her and she's part of me."

The following sequence strengthens the screenplay's suggestion of a deep symbiotic relationship actually existing between Allan and Ella in which the human factor is really the dominant factor motivating the animal's actions. After consulting Dr. Williams for a second opinion, Allan and Melanie learn that his quadriplegic condition is much more complex. Indirectly criticizing "the brilliant Dr. Wiseman", Dr. Williams informs Allan that his condition may be actually "part of a congenital problem, an abnormality that doesn't look like it was caused by a truck. The accident could have been part of a tragic coincidence." Allan's condition is thus psychosomatic rather than material. The film does not choose to explore what exactly this "congenital problem" actually is. However, Romero's screenplay and the excellent acting performances by Jason Beghe and Joyce Van Patten suggest that Allan's condition really results from a dysfunctional family situation affecting them both. Dorothy has always attempted to dominate her son since he was little as the revealing home movie showed. Allan thus resented her controlling manner from an early age. His masochistic training techniques appear more related to his psychological condition rather than being a part of a normal training exercise. Allan appears to have channeled his violently sadistic feelings against his family upbringing into masochistic channels. He desired to achieve in the solitary goal of winning, both as an athlete and as a law student, as a means to exert independence from a constraining situation. Ironically, he had ended up in the situation of the very family dependency he attempted to escape from. As Dr. Williams suggests, Allan's "accident" has deeper causes than the "tragic coincidence" of his random collision with a truck. The symbolic appearance of the savage dog attempting to escape from its leash in the credit sequence has already intimated such a possibility.

Dr. Williams maintains an institutional dimension of professional silence when Allan asks him about Wiseman's operation, "So if he had looked harder and found what caused it, he could have fixed it?" Allan then forms the logical conclusion. Ella immediately jumps on Allan's shoulder as Romero uses a voice-over to articulate the injured party's angry thoughts. "Wiseman! That mother fucker. That smarmy self-satisfied son of a bitch." This technique only appears once in this sequence. Its very arbitrary appearance suggests that the director intends that his audience arrive at a significant meaning. The next shot shows Melanie's eyes through the front window of her van as she listens to Allan's anger. "He put me through this whole fucking thing due to his own incompetence." The thought mediated in a previous scene through a voice-over making the audience knowledgeable about Allan's feelings now becomes explicit for another character in this scene. As Allan rages, Romero cuts from a close-up of Ella to her angry master suggesting a deep bond between them. Melanie also discerns certain unhealthy feelings. "I don't like this change in you, Allan." As the next sequence reveals, thought becomes translated into action. This intimates that, like Karloff's Frankenstein monster, a creature is not entirely guilty since it merely performs its master's desires.

When Allan gets Ella to contact the phone numbers of

Wiseman and Linda, he finally learns the double nature of his betrayal. Romero pertinently concludes the scene of Wiseman and Linda embracing with a lap-dissolve to Allan's hurt expression. Juxtaposed matching close-ups of the eyes and teeth of Allan and Ella then follow. When Allan bites his lip in emotional pain, blood trickles down his cheek. Ella immediately leaps to comfort her master by licking the blood away. The next sequence reveals Ella as a "blood sister" in both thought and action. Point of view shots then follow in rapid succession revealing Ella's progress to Linda's house, Wiseman and Linda coupling in the bedroom, and a shot of fire filling the screen.

The next morning Allan exhibits his knowledge of the deaths of Linda and Wiseman before Dorothy actually informs him. He informs Geoff about his desire for Ella's removal and blames her for the deaths. However, as the dialogue reveals, the issue is really ambiguous. While Geoff asserts, "Ella would never have done it," Allan replies, "I wanted it done...I thought about ways of doing it. I knew that old cabin. I knew it would burn fast." However, when Melanie confronts Allan with the revealing question, "Did you do it, or did she?" he chooses to absolve himself of any responsibility for his actions in a manner resembling Joan Mitchell in *Jack's Wife*. "She did it. She acted on her own." Allan's explanations are also contradictory as the following lines reveal. "Geoff, I've been so full of anger. I've had the most horrible thoughts lately, vomiting up every resentful thought I've had, everything ugly, vicious, and sinful. That's what it is—it's sin. It's the desire to sin, Geoff. Ella's played into that." Allan's refusal to take the full consequences for his actions by deciding to blame supposedly supernatural forces places him in the same culpable category as Joan Mitchell.

Significantly, after appearing to take responsibility for his actions, Allan retreats into an anachronistic and implausible explanation which bears no relationship to any of the film's events. He is eager to blame his servant for executing the master's desires. When Ella instinctively retreats before a match, thus disapproving Allan's contention that she set Linda's home on fire, Allan remarks, "Is that an instinctive reaction. Or does she know what fire can do?" He is clearly putting his legal training into action to absolve himself of any responsibility for his role in the murder of Wiseman and Linda. Geoff decides to take Ella back to the laboratory to perform tests even though he sees through Allan's religious excuses. "But I don't expect to find sin in a urine sample." Ella also reacts to her removal and poignantly appeals to her master when Geoff drags her away. However, Allan ignores her pleas and tells Geoff "Don't bring her back" rejecting her in the same way Colin Clive's Frankenstein ignored responsibility for his creation in Whale's film.

Melanie then decides to take Allan away to a different environment which turns out to be her country home. Despite his angry reaction against Dorothy's manipulated attempts to return him to a state of infantile dependence, Allan weeps in Melanie's arms like a little boy expressing his desire to "try to" get better. This action certainly reveals both Allan's own form of manipulative tendencies and the type of cunning tactic he will later use against Ella at the climax of the film when he deceives her about his real intentions. Although Allan expresses his indebtedness concerning the supposed benefits of tranquil surroundings, "I can feel myself coming back to normal," Melanie humorously, but significantly, questions his motives, "Every minute you're away from me, or Ella?" Allan replies, "Both." He then nuzzles up to Melanie in the same manner Ella did to him and initiates love making. Allan's movements again appear manipulative rather than spontaneous suggesting that he is the real puppetmaster and

not Ella. When Allan apologizes to Melanie, he has a knowing expression on his face like an actor delivering a prepared performance rather than a spontaneous response.

In the meantime Geoff attends to Ella in his laboratory noticing the difference she has from the rest of the capuchin monkeys. His remarks are extremely significant on more than one level suggesting not only Allan's undeniable role in Ella's activities but also the fact that he may be manipulating her. "They're all getting the same dosage. The missing ingredient must be Allan." After noting Ella's lack of pain during her next injection, Geoff remarks to her, "You didn't do all that stuff Allan's been blaming you for...you couldn't have committed murder." If Allan is the "missing ingredient" in Ella's case, the same is also true of the brain serum Geoff injects her with. When he notes Ella's lack of pain afterwards he comments, "I've turned you into a fucking junkie." He, of course, has performed similar actions to Dr. Logan in *Day* by making his subject all too human and deadlier than a mere animal. Furthermore, the animals respond to human anger and do not act on their own initiative as two later scenes reveal. When Geoff returns to find Burbage has stolen his experiments, the caged monkeys reproduce his anger by jumping around in their cages. They enact Geoff's frustration in the same way as Ella responds to Allan's dark desires. Secondly, after Geoff injects himself with the serum and experiences Ella's perception, the monkeys escape from their cages and destroy his laboratory as a way of responding to his murderous intention of killing Ella. They certainly wish to protect one of their own species who has undergone a devious form of human experimentation. Geoff also switches off the fluorescent lighting and undergoes the experiment while infernoesque red light bathes his laboratory. Although he begins the experiment by saying to Ella, "If this shot can plug you into Allan's head then maybe it can plug me into yours," like Allan he denies the fact that he may also be using Ella in the same way that Allan does.

While Geoff performs the experiment, Allan and Dorothy engage in another domestic conflict. Already angry at Allan's weekend tryst with Melanie, Dorothy bathes Allan. Unlike the costumes she wore earlier in the film, she is now dressed as a traditional mother with pinafore and unattractive gown. Romero intercuts the scenes showing the development of the explosive resentment between mother and son with subjective shots of Ella's journey to the house and Geoff immobile in the laboratory. Humans and animal are equally involved in experiencing dangerous conflicts and tensions. Boundaries between the supposedly rational world of humans and the more violent animal world dissolve. Romero's screenplay deserves careful attention since it develops important levels of meaning during this sequence. Although Allan attempts to "bury the hatchet" twice, Dorothy's resentment against Melanie and the refusal of her son to return to a desired state of infantile dependency finally leads to verbal and physical violence. In many ways, the scene is highly reminiscent of *Night's* interior farmhouse conflict where humans war against each other while dangerous inhuman enemies wait outside to overpower them. Despite Allan's realization of the dangerous effects of his emotional behavior, he immediately regresses to abusing verbally Dorothy and blaming Ella for actions he has initiated himself. After "sensing" Ella's presence in the house, he pleads with Dorothy. "These rages. Ella pulls them out of me. Ella pulls them to the surface." Despite attempting to warn his mother, Allan also denies his real responsibility. Dorothy also engages in denial and expresses her resentment for domestic slavery against her son. She blames Allan for a decision she decided to make in the first place. "I've given up everything for you." Allan angrily responds, "Who asked you

to give up anything?" He also vehemently unleashes all his repressed anger against her. "You're nothing but an empty, greedy black hole. You've been trying to suck me into it for as long as I can remember. I can not stand it anymore. I can not stand your bullshit. You conniving, clinging, bloodthirsty, bitch!" Allan's verbal assault leads to Dorothy's physical attack on him before she leaves the room.

Allan's anger against Dorothy appears initially justifiable under the circumstances. However, he is not entirely innocent. Some of the things he accuses Dorothy of also apply to himself. In his later strategy against Ella, Allan reveals himself as equally "conniving" and "bloodthirsty." His tendency to blame Ella for carrying out his own repressed desires is also "bullshit." Like many Romero characters, Allan struggles between rational control and succumbing to dark, self-destructive tendencies buried deeply within the human personality. Realizing the presence of his "familiar spirit" in the house, he attempts in vain to warn Dorothy before Ella electrocutes her. Also, when Geoff arrives at the house, he asks Allan, "Ella's not in here with you?" When Allan replies, "No, I don't think so," Romero zooms out from Allan on the bed. He finishes the movement at an angle equivalent to Ella's perspective seen in a previous shot which revealed her perched on top of his bedroom cabinet in the very same position.

Allan still vacillates between admitting his responsibility for Ella's action and denying it. When Allan finally admits, "It's me. I've killed them, all of them," Geoff replies, "You couldn't kill anything, Allan." However, at this moment, Allan knows himself much better than his friend. "I've had five thousand years of civilization in me. But what if I wasn't civilized anymore? What if I was an animal? Then, I follow my instincts. That's what this all is, instinct. Animal instinct. It lives in us all, lives by its own set of laws, laws of the jungle." However, when Geoff admits his own responsibility, Allan sees an escape route so he can now avoid blaming himself and engage in denial. Geoff gives the "scientific" explanation which most audiences would readily accept. Unlike, Allan, he also blames himself and sees his culpability in the affair. Geoff thus arrives at a state of understanding far exceeding Dr. Logan in *Day*. "You didn't do it, Allan. I did. Ella has been genetically altered. I've had her on a new drug all this time. I lost track, Allan. I lost track of everything but my work." However, the human factor is still important since the "new drug" enabled Ella to reach a higher stage of development not entirely advanced or ethical. Both scientist and patient bear equal responsibility for programming an animal to enact violent desires which are really part of an instinctually violent human condition.

Allan immediately seizes on Geoff's admission and angrily reacts against him in a manner recalling his earlier attitude against Wiseman. "I was just part of an experiment? A guinea pig? What did you do to Ella? What did you do to me?" Interestingly enough, these last two sentences reveal again that he intuitively still regards Ella as inseparable from himself. Ella then attacks Geoff and proves herself more intelligent than her human adversary by using his deadly syringe on him. Although Geoff still has some final moments of consciousness, he refuses Allan's request to use the phone to enlist help choosing instead to go for medical treatment and save his already discredited scientific reputation. His final stubborn desire to keep Ella's activities secret lead to his demise. Allan then realizes that his Frankenstein monster now wishes to control him as she begins to feed him like a child. However, Allan also realizes their deep bond. "You can't hurt me. I'm part of you." When Melanie later arrives inside the house and sees Geoff's body, her lines reveal a

much more accurate understanding of the real situation. She asks, "Did you do that or did she?" Allan again engages in denial, "She did it." But, before Ella attacks her, Melanie knowingly responds, "That's right, Allan. *You* had nothing to do with it." At this point of the film, Ella is really kin to Bub of *Day* rather than being an external threat. Allan now faces a threat to himself as well as Melanie. He turns against his creation verbally abusing her in a more aggressive manner than his now deceased mother. The very nature of his language suggestively denotes his repressed anger not only at his infantile condition but also one paralleling the traditional role of the female confined to the home. Fearing and resenting the female side of his own nature, he aggressively channels his anger against Ella who then exercises her own form of poetic justice and urinates on him. Seeing Ella attempting to kill Melanie with Geoff's deadly syringe, Allan manages to turn on his cassette to attract Ella by the romantic music which then plays. On one level, Allan rises to the situation by seeing Melanie's danger. But, alternatively, he may be motivated by aggressive desires towards a former pet who now treats him like an infant in the very same way his mother did. Both motivations may be present in Allan's mind and it is impossible to suggest which one is really dominant. However, Allan then uses the very "conniving" qualities he earlier condemned in Dorothy by coaxing Ella to approach him for an act of loving intimacy so he can bury his teeth in her neck and kill her. Allan's act is one of bloodthirsty savagery illustrating his kinship with "animal instincts" lying dormant beneath his "five thousand years of civilization." On one level, his action is the result of a

human being defending himself against a murderous primate. But it also denotes the final deadly bond he has with Ella when he now kills without using a convenient surrogate sacrificial victim.

The sequence ends on a note of deep ambiguity. Allan has overcome his monster. But he will have to live with the consequences. Unfortunately, studio politics dictated that Romero shoot two different endings rather than the ambiguous and ironic conclusion he originally intended. One ending reveals Dr. Williams about to operate on Allan and Ella emerging from his back like the "chestbuster" in *Alien*. The other shows Allan leaving hospital, getting out of his wheelchair and using crutches to join Melanie in her van to depart for a romantic weekend. Neither ending does justice to the complexity of *Monkey Shines*. These endings were added at the insistence of Orion after studio previews of the film. Romero originally wanted the film's climax to follow Michael Stewart's original novel where Allan never recovers from his accident. The final sequence of the film depicted Dean Burbage breaking into Geoff's laboratory to steal his research findings. However, before he can do this, the final shot showed a monkey suddenly appearing in the frame to condemn another human manipulation of the animal world. But, despite studio interference, *Monkey Shines* is another significant chapter in Romero's examination of a human condition necessitating neither zombies nor deadly monkeys for relevant levels of meaning.

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Monkey Shines



POSTMODERN CINEMA

Sunset Boulevard



and the Death of the Hero

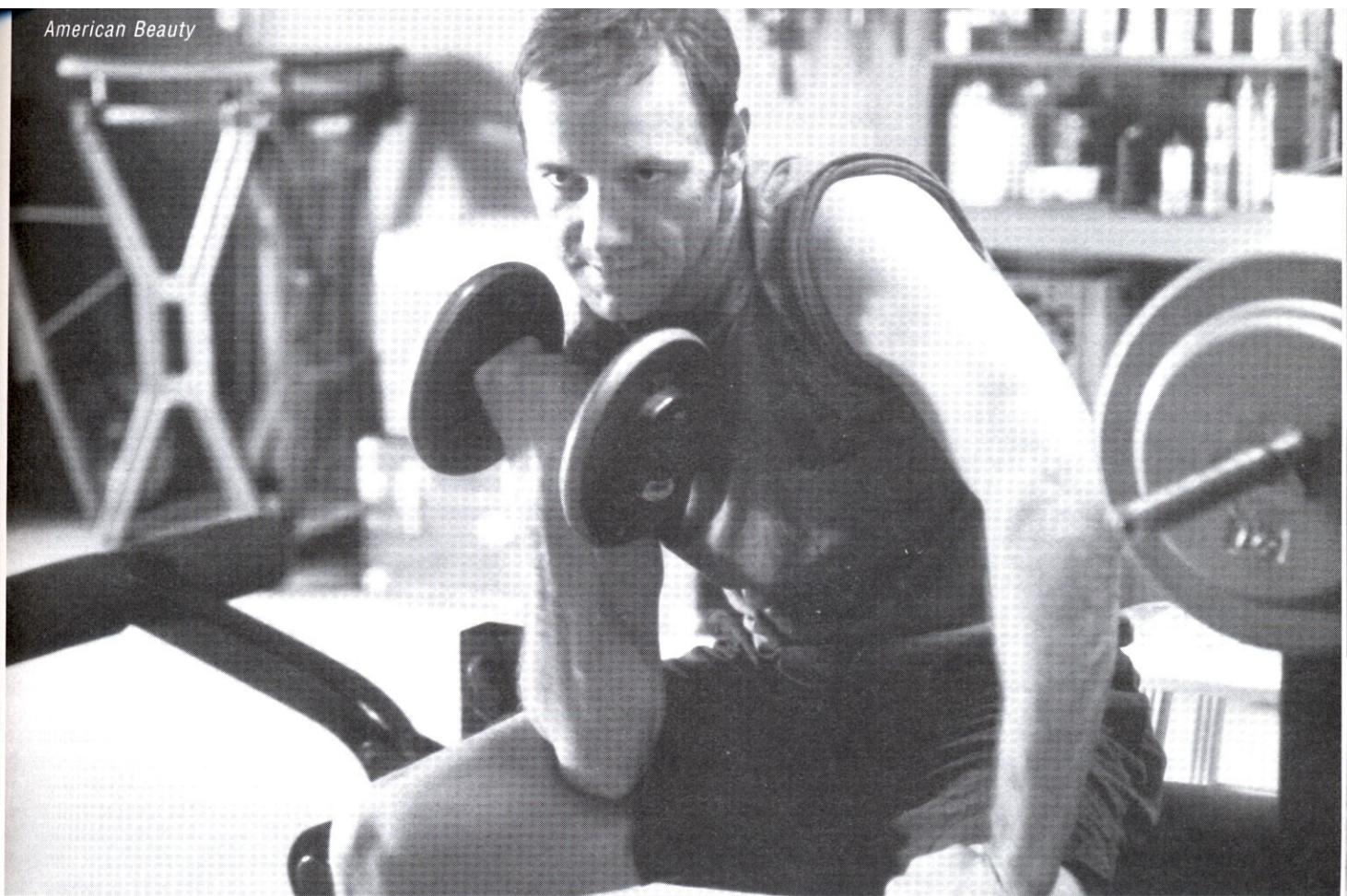
By **Tom Pollard**

Film heroes, or protagonists, fascinate and intrigue us today, just as they have since the invention of motion pictures. People never tire of reading or viewing narratives of heroic individuals struggling against overwhelming odds. Interest in heroes dates back to ancient times, when audiences flocked to Egyptian, Greek or Roman theaters and amphitheaters to attend plays featuring dramatic, tragic, or comic protagonists. Ancient audiences marveled at the deeds of Osiris, Perseus, Thesus, Heracles, and Odysseus as portrayed by amateur or professional actors. These early heroes eventually succeed, one way or another, sometimes by slaying dragons or other monsters. Just as often, though, heroes must slay other warriors instead of dragons, while at other times they must overcome far greater obstacles than these, including aliens, terrorists, and even entire armies in order to achieve their goals. Victorious, conquering heroes continue to evoke reverence and adulation today, whether they are military, sports, financial, political, or entertainment figures. In as far back as 1748 Thomas Morell wrote the familiar lines "See, the conquering hero comes! Sound the trumpet, beat the drums!"¹ echoing hero worship in his day. Many of today's heroes, by contrast, display flawed, all-to-human personas. Today's audiences increasingly encounter a very different category of heroes featured in films and television unknown in Morell's era, yet the images projected by these media, as well as by fiction, poetry, and drama, reveal a flawed, doomed category of protagonists that I call "postmodern heroes."

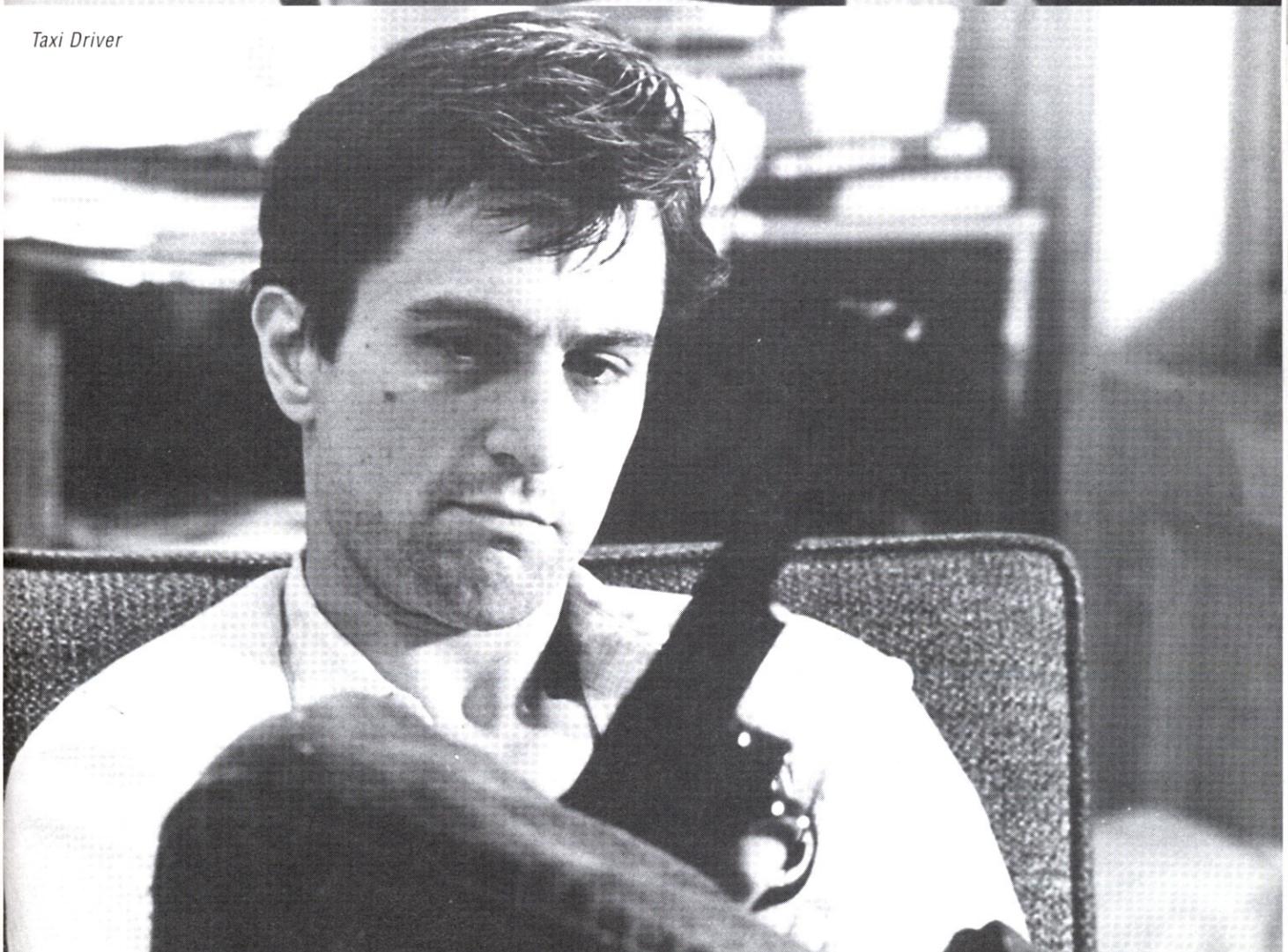
The familiar "hero's journey" has long been mapped and plotted, as well as analyzed, psychoanalyzed, and deconstructed. Heroes and their deeds attract interest and attention whenever they are discussed or dramatized. Joseph Campbell, though, continues to be the one who most readily comes to mind regarding hero studies. Some writers and filmmakers adapted Joseph Campbell's stages of the mythological hero's journey that make their first appearance, according to Campbell, in ancient mythology and that continue to describe the adventures of contemporary film heroes. Stuart Voytilla, in *Myth and the Movies: Discovering the Mythic Structure of 50 Unforgettable Films* (Michael Wiese, 1999) adapts Campbell's stages to analyze the plot structures of fifty major films of the past. These stages, according to Campbell, include the "call to adventure," "refusal of the call," "meeting the mentor," "crossing the threshold," "belly of the whale," "atonement with the father," and "the road back," among others. Charlie Allnut's (Humphrey Bogart) refusal to assist Rose Sayer (Katherine Hepburn) in sailing the African Queen riverboat down the dangerous U lange River for the purpose of torpedoing the German ship "Louisa," followed by his (reluctant) decision to go along, represents the initial reluctance of many modernist heroes. In this study we can find many examples of reluctant modernist heroes who go on to achieve dramatic victories against over-

1. Weber, *Economy and Society*, NY. Bedminster Press, 1968, p. 241

American Beauty



Taxi Driver



whelming odds—a scenario that in fact describes the plots of most Hollywood films. Audiences of these films expect to find rugged, determined, self-reliant heroes who, despite their initial recalcitrance, act in some way to protect society (or at least a particular segment of it) against dangerous villains who threaten mayhem and destruction. Over the past two decades, however, audiences have found themselves viewing films that increasingly portray quite different sorts of characters that fit the syndrome of the “postmodern hero.” Postmodern cinema refers to neo-film noirs and angst-filled comedies as well as the ever-present blockbusters, where a new kind of hero is showcased—one who never quite achieves victory but ends up mired somewhere along Campbell’s “road of trials.” Instead of serving as great paragons of strength and determination, like Charlie and Rose in *The African Queen*, postmodern heroes are far more likely to be social misfits, outcasts, grifters, and losers, characters who usually end up blocked if not destroyed by powerful forces arrayed against them. Forced into action by a hostile world, postmodern heroes rarely succeed in their projects. Failures and misfits, many postmodern heroes fail to survive past the climax. The few that do somehow manage to survive hang on only by suffering tremendous personal loss. In fact, many postmodern films today feature not heroes in the conventional sense but “antiheroes,” characters who have crossed a somewhat indistinct line between villain and hero. Protagonists of these films are not heroes at all in the conventional sense of the word, but characters that function essentially as vivid warnings designed to shock audiences out of their complacency. This is the situation I have in mind when I refer to the “death” of heroes, which has become an established pattern within the brief legacy of postmodern cinema. Aside from the obvious specter of physical death, there is frequently a kind of spiritual death brought about by massive social forces beyond the heroes’ control. Doomed, maimed, or otherwise powerless heroes, of course, reveal a profound degree of pessimism and cynicism toward social institutions manifested by the makers of these films and, presumably, by their audiences. In fact, as mentioned above, many of today’s postmodern heroes are really not “heroes” at all in the sense in which we usually use that term, but fall instead into the category of “antiheroes,” or villains who function as film protagonists.

Modernist heroes, however, are far different than postmodern ones, being more on the order of the “Weberian hero,” derived from Max Weber’s theory of charisma and charismatic leadership, in which the hero/leader makes history by transforming society either as a prophet, shaman, magician, warrior, or revolutionary. In film, the Weberian hero usually assumes the warrior form, though he or she may on occasion emerge as a prophet (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*), shaman (*Star Wars*) or magician (*Batman*). In any case, to Weber the hero/leader is understood as a figure that stands apart, endowed with the vital quality of charisma and in some cases even with superhuman powers. This hero seems akin to Freud’s description of certain gifted individuals who exercise great personal or intellectual influence over others. “Great men,” Freud argued, typically receive the veneration of their contemporaries, “although their greatness rests on attributes and achievements which are completely foreign to the aims and ideals of the multitude.”² Whether we define them as great men, gods, or supermen, modernist narrative heroes usually embody this more exalted view of the heroic ideal. The Weberian hero appears in modernist films like classical westerns that feature protagonists with rare skills and abilities to perform virtual feats of magic as they cleave a hangman’s noose from 200 yards while riding a galloping horse or shoot holes in silver dollars thrown high into the air. Modernist

heroes embody this Promethean ideal of “great men.” No matter how many guns were arrayed against him, the classic western hero as portrayed by John Wayne, Gary Cooper, or Alan Ladd generally prevailed against horrific odds and ruthless, skillful villains.

Weber also observed that the modernist hero emerges during tumultuous times—a strong, creative leader who becomes a vehicle for social change through decisive action. Taken to extremes, this concept evokes Nietzsche’s idea of an “Übermensch” who can change society via the “will to power.” Modernist heroes may not possess fully the will to power as Nietzsche conceived it, but fierce tenacity in the face of nearly impossible odds is a nearly universal characteristic of such protagonists, who populate most of literature as well as film. It is this modernist hero that has so dominated cinematic history and continues even today to represent a major thrust in filmmaking. In contrast, existentialism also has a powerful if often unseen influence on the postmodern hero. The emphasis here is upon individuals who are “trapped in existence,” with no prospects of escape or redemption in the end. Thus existentialism demands that human beings somehow apprehend and then learn to accept the ambiguity and indeterminacy of the human condition, enabling them to express their alienation from the social world as it is constituted. Only when individuals accept reality and resign themselves to the basic unfairness, ugliness, and brutality of life will they become able to acquire any kind of freedom, though they can never be expected to achieve redemption or salvation. The existentialist approach, though European in origin, seems especially suited to persons who find themselves in a state of reaction against the modernist, rationalist outlook that has prevailed in Western culture since the Enlightenment.

Thomas Hobbes’ powerfully pessimistic view of the human condition, stated in his famous description of it being “nasty, short, and brutish,” also corresponds to the trajectory of postmodern films and their heroes. Hobbes believed that in the state of nature humans are constantly at war with each other—that is, unless a strong government emerges to impose a binding system of rules and procedures. The fate of individuals is to live out miserable, dangerous existences surrounded by fragmentation and chaos. In postmodern films we expect characters that fear and distrust each other, much as they would in the natural state of affairs described by Hobbes. Postmodern heroes typically convey moods of cynicism, pessimism, and fear, unless already resigned to their inevitable death—as in the case of Lester Burnham’s fate in *American Beauty*. The viewer cannot expect to encounter random acts of kindness in postmodern films; but will find instead a mixture of cold, calculating, deceitful, and treacherous people, more or less as Hobbes predicted; life turns out to be as brief as it is sordid, a cesspool of human misery and degradation.

On the other hand, the modernist conception of heroes, with its strong overtones of Enlightenment optimism, has long been under attack by those who advanced a more realistic, less optimistic view of actors. One such view was expressed by the Russian writer Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841), who scornfully dismissed “hero of our time” as “indeed a portrait, but not of a single individual; it is a portrait comprised of all the vices of our generation in the fullness of their development.” This could describe today’s postmodern hero.³ This view of the hero belies the modernist prototype of sterling qualities standing upright against overwhelming odds and never giving up, never relenting until the inevitable victory comes near the end. This kind of hero has also disturbed some of our best writers. F. Scott Fitzgerald, for example, realized the impossibility of writing about these kinds of charac-

ters. To Fitzgerald, and, indeed, to the majority of our revered fiction writers, successful heroes seemed both unrealistic and boring. Fitzgerald wrote "Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy."⁴ Fitzgerald's and Lemontov's views of heroes would today be considered realistic, not pessimistic. They are considerably more pessimistic, however, than Weber's, coinciding more closely with those of Hobbes. To these earlier writers heroes are fitter candidates for pity and tragedy, as in the postmodern tradition, than for praise and honor, which is the hallmark of heroes of the modernist hero.

Before more fully addressing the theme of postmodern heroes, let us first look at their cinematic predecessors—early films presenting uncharacteristically unsuccessful, doomed protagonists. Tragedy, of course, has always existed in film, witness the many versions of Shakespeare's tragic plays, but American tragedy in general usually differs from classical narratives in which the hero possesses vital character defects and is ultimately constrained by Aristotelian notions of dramatic unity. Contemporary American tragic heroes are more like Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's famous play *Death of a Salesman*, ordinary people simply unable to cope with or overcome the powerful array of forces and obstacles pitted against them. During the early 1940s a few influential directors like Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, and Billy Wilder, working in the thriller tradition, introduced compelling, tragic heroes along the lines of Willy Loman, in the process subverting Hollywood conventions that dictated triumphant heroes and happy endings. These directors, and others, contributed to a major development in film style and content that has since been labeled "film noir." These films featured scripts from some of the period's dark novels by the likes of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and James M. Cain. These novelists were creating dark, urban dystopias in their fiction inhabited by treacherous, duplicitous hero-villains that had been labeled "roman noir," or black novels. Welles, on the other hand, collaborated with Frank L. Mankovitz to create a screenplay that featured not a successful, youthful protagonist as had most films of the past, but a more complex protagonist who would die in the film's first scene. Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941), which chronicles the well-known rise and fall of newspaper magnate Charles Foster Kane, who serves as perhaps the best example of a doomed film noir hero. Kane does in fact die dramatically in the very first scene, clutching a glass paperweight and uttering the now-famous dying word "Rosebud." The rest of the film narrative is told in flashbacks. Kane, it turns out, spends his entire life searching for lost youth and the close personal relationship he once had with his mother, but he never manages to form lasting attachments with anyone. Instead, he succeeds in alienating his closest friends and allies, including two ex-wives. His attempts at control and domination make Kane more an antihero than a hero. Similarly, the heroes of Hitchcock's films in this period typically fare little better than Charles Foster Kane. For example, one of Hitchcock's most vivid heroes is Charlie (played by Teresa Wright), who finally is able to survive at the climax of the noirish classic *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) only by killing her beloved Uncle Charley, whom, it turns out, is a psychopathic killer. Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), an early film noir, presents another doomed hero, Walter Neff (Fred McMurry), an insurance agent who murders a man so he can possess his beautiful wife, played by Barbara Stanwyck, and collect on his life insurance, which pays double indemnity in the event of natural death. "I killed for money and for a woman," Neff confesses to Keys, his boss, (Edward G. Robinson) "And I didn't get the money and I didn't get the woman!" Such cynical, pessimistic films were typical of the film noir movement in Hollywood cinema. By 1950, noir heroes had finally bot-

tomed: for instance, Joe Gillis (played by William Holden), the hero of Wilder's noir classic *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), not only fails to survive, he makes his dramatic entrance in the opening sequence already dead, floating face down in a swimming pool. Referring to himself, Gillis explains in a dooms-laden tone how he came to be there: "Poor dope," he laments. "He always wanted a pool. Well, in the end he got himself a pool, only the price turned out to be a little high!" Gillis' highly ironic attitude toward one of the most desirable of luxuries captures perfectly the film noir attitude toward the post-war malaise. Even noir heroes who manage to stay alive until the pictures' end generally suffer debilitating losses and failures during this period. The memorable heroes of this time usually wind up defeated, often beat (like the Beat Movement of the same period), and profoundly confused. Those whom we do not find dead at the end have frequently suffered trauma and even collapse—a thematic that begins the epic trend to which I refer as "death of the hero." During this period, also, we began to discover antiheroes who fill the role of villain as well as hero.

Film noir represents an offshoot of the popular thriller genre that began its existence during the earliest periods of film history. Martin Rubin, in *Thrillers*, his comprehensive study of the genre, identifies precursors of thriller films in the Gothic novel of the nineteenth century with their strong, stirring atmosphere and tormented, unhappy characters. Edgar Allan Poe's stories from the Gothic period (which certainly encompassed elements of Romanticism), including "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842), "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), and "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846) feature doomed, tragic anti-heroes. His crime novel, *The Murders on the Rue Morgue* (1832), served as the prototype for the detective novel. The heroes of many of these novels are criminals (in the case of the protagonists of Poe's short stories) or other singularly non-"heroic" individuals in the older sense of the word, including private detectives. Rubin identifies such early film thrillers as many of the works of D. W. Griffith, Fritz Lang, and Alfred Hitchcock (in his British period of the thirties and forties). He also includes spy and horror films as thriller sub-categories. Rubin concludes that the heroes of these thrillers most often are not "heroic" individuals but are, instead, usually passive. These heroes "are often acted upon more than they act; they are swept up in a rush of events over which they have little control." Furthermore, thrillers create "in both hero and spectator a strong sense of being carried away, of surrendering yourself."⁵ As we can see, these passive thriller heroes fail to conform to the Weberian ideal of the decisive, forceful heroic individual. Rubin also notes that film noir heroes differ significantly from those of other thriller genres because the former are even less in control than other thriller heroes, to the point that noir heroes become victims rather than purposeful agents. "The film noir hero," he informs us, "is often crushed by a bewildering web of circumstances, compounded by his own inner weaknesses." (p. 34) Therefore, heroes of film noirs deviate even further than those of other thriller genres from the earlier Weberian ideal.

More recent neo-noirs of the 1970s—which can now be labeled postmodern—also embellish desperate heroes who, though still alive at film's end, are far too weak and powerless to emerge victorious from their encounters with powerful and

2. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, in *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. *Sigmund Freud*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. 1952, p. 767.

3. Michael Lemontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, 1841: author's introduction.

4. F. Scott Fitzgerald letter in Edmund Wilson, ed. *The Crack-up* 1945.

5. Cambridge University Press, 1999: 6.



Pulp Fiction



sinister individuals or social forces that they confront. Neo-noir heroes appear even less like the Weberian ideal type. Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), for instance, features hero Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson), who fails to save beautiful Evelyn Mulroney (Faye Dunaway) and her young daughter from her child-rapist father Noah Cross (John Huston). Cross explains his position very honestly, though chillingly: "You see, Mr. Gittes, most people never have to face the fact that at the right time and the right place they are capable of anything!" This gruesome concession might serve as a synopsis of the central themes permeating films of this sort, which dwell on the dark side of American life. John Cawelti observes that the dark, chaotic forces opposing Gittes constituted a major change from the menacing forces of "evil" depicted in earlier noir detective films. "Chinatown places the hard-boiled detective story within a view of the world that is deeper and more catastrophic, more enigmatic in its evil, more sudden and inexplicable in its outbreaks of violent chance" writes Cawelti. "In the end," he argues, "the image of the heroic, moral action embedded in the traditional private-eye myth turns out to be totally inadequate to overcome the destructive realities revealed in the course of this story."⁶

The sea-change in films featuring doomed, dead heroes begins with neo-noirs like *Chinatown*, one of the first films to present chaotic social forces as basically invincible, and extends to films like Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), where the heroes are killed in the end, and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), which concludes with the hero himself doing the killing. Neo-noir heroes like Jake Gittes are scarcely modernist in the sense of acting in the manner of John Wayne—style macho protagonists but are, for the most part, deeply flawed characters who, under particular circumstances, turn out to be capable of the most grotesque, criminal deeds, or "just about anything." Many of these protagonists can probably be described as psychotic. Who can forget Travis Bickle's (Robert De Niro) rage in *Taxi Driver* as he threatens his mirror image by demanding "You talking to me? You talking to me? You talking to me? Well, who the hell else are you talking to?" This outburst clearly foreshadows the violence we see propagated by Bickle at the end of the film. Other leading postmodern characters are less psychotic than merely compromised or feeble. In Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* (1981), Ned Racine (William Hurt) epitomizes the postmodern hero who is neither smart nor talented enough to succeed in his various enterprises. The film's villain, femme noir Matty Walker (Kathleen Turner), tells Ned sarcastically "You're not too smart, are you? I like that in a man." The heroes of many of these early neo-noirs manage to survive, but, like those of Hitchcock's and Welles' earlier films, are forced to pay a heavy price in the form of powerlessness, collapse of self-esteem, and alienation. Critic James Ursini, in his discussion of neo-noir and its many offshoots, concludes that such films appeal to a mass of people who identify with the hopeless, defeated, often dead protagonists of neo-noir.⁷ In later postmodern movies like Steven Frears' *The Grifters* (1990), manifestly successful protagonists able to survive their heroic journeys become extremely difficult to find. Here we discover femme noirs who easily outdo the familiar male villains of modernist films (Nazis, cattlemen, gun fighters) in their boundless capacity for deceit, manipulation, and ruthlessness. One of these, Myra Langtree (Annette Benning), tells the villainous Lily Dillon (Anjelica Huston), who is her boyfriend's mother, "I'm Roy's Friend." Lily then answers icily, revealing her true assessment of her son's girlfriend, "Yes, I imagine you're lots of people's friend." Roy Dillon (John Cusack) ends up being murdered by Lily, his own mother, with whom he has fallen incestuously in love. Lily also kills Myra, although in self-

defense, with frighteningly practiced ease. In the end Lily alone has survived, but only by being forceful enough to defeat Myra and, ultimately, even her own son. She has become the film's protagonist, but hardly its "hero" in the traditional sense. She has become the ultimate grifter. In John Dahl's *The Last Seduction* (1994), the femme noir Wendy Croy (Linda Fiorentino) puts even Lily Dillon to shame with her unbelievably scheming and villainous behavior. After stealing all of her husband's money (obtained in a drug deal that she plans) Wendy flees to a small town. Upon entering a bar and finding herself ignored, she immediately becomes the center of attention when she asks brassily, "Jesus Christ, who does a girl have to suck around here to get a drink?" Mike (Peter Berg), who becomes Wendy's boyfriend, finds himself drawn inexorably to his own destruction by Wendy's manipulations. Mike, like Roy in *The Grifters*, lacks the strength of character to avoid being taken in by her scheme to manipulate him into murdering her husband. At the last minute Mike decides he cannot murder Wendy's husband, but lacks the strength to alter the course of events after Wendy herself murders her husband, then goads Mike into raping her. Mike of course ends up behind bars, charged with rape and framed for the husband's murder, while Wendy calmly drives away with plenty of money and no regrets. Characters like Wendy raise alarms about the villainous potential of wives, lovers, and seemingly "normal" next door neighbors. Films like *The Grifters* and *The Last Seduction* represent a phase of postmodern filmmaking featuring films with terrifying, scheming female antiheroes combined with weak, ineffective male characters who wind up dead or at least severely emasculated. In these films males typically vacillate while their women, wives and mothers, are frequently portrayed as ruthless, cunning, and even invincible. Such "postmodern" men are either dead by film's end or essentially "dead" by virtue of being imprisoned.

Ridley Scott's enduring *Thelma and Louise* (1991), starring Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon, features two of the most celebrated postmodern heroines of the past two decades. The film presents two adventurous women forced outside the law by a vicious, male-dominated culture that surrounds them at every turn. Setting out on a weekend excursion, the women encounter a sexist world in all its ugliness: rape, obscene gestures, a predatory truck driver, even robbery after Thelma's one-night stand. At the same time, the very exhilaration of revolt enables both women to experience freedom for the first time in their lives. Indeed, Thelma confesses to Louise that she can never return to her previous existence: "Something's like crossed over in me and I can't go back. I couldn't live." In the end committing suicide by driving over the edge of the Grand Canyon seems more appealing than being captured by an army of law enforcement officers who have cornered them near the canyon's rim. As they drive over the cliff they simultaneously express the futility of thwarting the patriarchal system and their heroic defiance of it. Their death symbolizes women's imprisonment within paternalism and their unrealized potential to take control of their own lives.

Oliver Stone, one of the most political of postmodern filmmakers, also builds a number of films around dead heroes, including *Talk Radio* (1988), *The Doors* (1991), and *JFK* (1991). In *The Doors*, of course, it is rock icon Jim Morrison (Val Kilmer) who serves as the idealized dead postmodern hero. A tragic victim of his own commercial success in the music

6. John W. Cawelti, "Chinatown in Generic Transformation in Recent American Films," in Gerald Mast and Marshal Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism*, Oxford U. Press, 1985, 509.

7. "Angst at Sixty Fields per Second," in Alain Silver and James Ursini, *Film Noir Reader*, New York, Limelight Editions, 1998; p. 287.

industry, Morrison wastes his brilliant talents by overindulging in both drugs and alcohol, eventually perishing after achieving enormous cult status. *JFK* features what must be considered the ultimate dead hero, John F. Kennedy, who shares the focus with maverick New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner), who reopened the JFK assassination case, only to eventually run aground. Garrison attempts to uncover a shadowy conspiracy said to consist of elements within the CIA, FBI, Mafia, and anti-Castro Cubans. In Stones' view, these groups conspire to murder Kennedy because he supposedly refused to escalate the Vietnam War fast enough, and because he decided against committing American military forces during and after the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. In the end, of course, Garrison fails to convict anyone of Kennedy's assassination. Garrison, Kennedy, and Jim Morrison all fit the paradigm of dead or powerless heroes doomed to oblivion at a time of grave social crisis. In the case of *JFK*, Stone, to an extent greater than other postmodern directors, places blame for tragic personal and political outcomes on the "military/industrial complex"—along with powerful right-wing forces lurking behind the scenes and secretly conspiring to shape history.

Not every postmodern hero, however, dies at the end; a few do manage to survive till the credits but not many. Those who do only manage to hang on to some shreds of life after suffering horrendous personal defeat—characters surely more to be pitied than admired. Inevitably, they have managed to survive only by making the most painful sacrifices. A good example of such a hero appears in Nicholas Kazan's *Dream Lover* (1994), which features Ray (James Spader), a handsome, prosperous architect who is seduced by Lena (Madchen Amick), who eventually marries him and then commits him to an insane asylum in order to loot his financial assets. Soon after Ray marries Lena he begins to experience surreal dreams of being in a carnival in which he gradually learns that his marriage was a tragic mistake, but Ray discovers the truth too late to reverse his deteriorating circumstances. Lena's devious plans unfold when she discovers that Ray has learned about her true character (something she has gone to great lengths to conceal), at which point she has Ray committed to an asylum even as he desperately struggles to free himself from her ruthless manipulations. In the end Ray, though falsely imprisoned by someone he had trusted, manages to survive—but only by strangling Lena upon her visit to the asylum. He murders her knowing that as a certified lunatic he will be released eventually because he will be found "not guilty by reason of insanity," as he explains gleefully to Lena while tightening his grip around her throat. "In a year I'll be sane again, and they'll have to let me out!" Ray's victory over the diabolical Lena, however, comes only after tremendous personal anguish and loss; he is forced to stoop to nothing less than murder in order to survive. Another postmodern hero who survives, though in much altered condition and state of mind, is Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Jules begins this film as a hit man for a local mobster but leaves the profession after being miraculously saved from being shot and killed by a young criminal. Jules is redeemed in this film in one sense, but it is a bitter redemption. His colleague Vincent (John Travolta), however, is shot and killed by Butch (Bruce Willis). Despite the abundant violence and mayhem depicted in this film, *Pulp Fiction* ultimately embraces important moments of redemption: a young woman, played by Uma Thurman, comes back to life after lapsing into a coma as the result of a drug overdose. Jules quits his murderous ways, and Butch, a prizefighter, escapes mob wrath with a fortune in illegal gambling winnings. Jackson has stated that "the voice of redemption flows through the whole film." Despite this voice,

however, Jules, though not actually dead, has perished as far as his previous existence goes and now must go forth to create a new life. Postmodern films impose heavy tolls on their "heroes," and the few who do survive wind up as pale reflections of their former personae.

Pulp Fiction, with its comic-book figures and exaggerated subject matter, contains many elements of black comedy. In postmodern cinema, it turns out that comic heroes fare little better than dramatic heroes, who are generally portrayed as losers or badly-flawed in some way. Woody Allen's protagonists, often representing aspects of Allen's own personality, commonly exhibit what might be viewed as "postmodern" weaknesses along the lines of insecurity, neuroses, fear, and a tendency to suffer in personal relations. *Annie Hall's* (1975) Alvy Singer, for instance, played by Allen himself, experiences great difficulties in his relationship with Annie (Diane Keaton) and can only observe ironically that personal relationships remind him of a story about a man whose brother thought he was a chicken. After explaining that he didn't turn in his brother for being a chicken because they needed the eggs, Alvy muses: "Well, I guess that's pretty much how I feel about relationships. You know, they're totally irrational and crazy and absurd, but I guess you keep going through it because most of us need the eggs."

Allen's *Zelig* (1983), again played by Allen himself, only manages to survive by becoming the ultimate conformist, a "human chameleon" able to change roles, shapes, even hair and skin color to reflect the dominant features of his surroundings. He becomes a jazz musician, Chinese, obese, an aid to Adolph Hitler, and a variety of other personae. Indeed, *Zelig* is the quintessential postmodern mock hero who seemingly embodies virtually every known disorder and insecurity of a postmodern world shaped by media culture. Allen himself maintains that *Zelig* is the embodiment of conformity. He explains, "well, I think it's a personal trait in everybody's life. It began in *Zelig's* life when he said that he had read *Moby Dick*. And you often find this with many people. Somebody asks, 'Have you read this or that?' and the other one says, 'Yea, yes, of course,' even if he hasn't. Because they want to be liked and be part of the group."⁸ The idea that human relationships tend to be conformist, shallow, crazy, and irrational is far removed from the traditional romantic view that a uniquely special person exists for every one who searches long and hard enough. Other postmodern comedies featuring compromised, flawed heroes include Tim Burton's *Ed Wood* (1994), a satire on the life of Edward D. Wood, Jr., who turns out to be simultaneously dead and incompetent, a 1950s Hollywood filmmaker who directed such bombs as *Glen or Glenda* and *Plan Nine from Outer Space*. Wood is the ultimate dead postmodern comic hero, someone at whom we can laugh while also feeling pity that he was so bereft of talent. He is to some degree like every man and every woman, sadly inept but nonetheless trying to create something meaningful out of his tragic life. John Waters' *Serial Mom* (1994), starring Kathleen Turner, is another postmodern comedy, which depicts one of the most unconventional heroes ever seen in film. Turner plays a stereotypical suburban housewife who discovers how rewarding it can be to murder seven of her neighbors for offenses that include failure to recycle, not wearing seat belts, eating chicken, and even (horror of horrors) for violating fashion customs by wearing white shoes after Labor Day! At the close of the film *Serial Mom* walks out of her murder trial not only a free woman but a media star who seems ready, willing, and able to kill again another day.

Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* (1999) not only enjoyed great success at the box office but virtually swept Academy Awards for 2000, winning five in all. Kevin Spacey plays Lester

Burnam, a middle-aged advertising copywriter about to be fired by his company, whose wife Caroline (Annette Benning) has sunk into a materialistic lifestyle that places more value on her Italian silk furniture than on the welfare of her husband and teenage daughter. As the film opens Lester's voice predicts: "I will be dead in less than a year, but I don't know it yet." Here he functions a bit like Weber's prophet-hero, but the event prophesied by Lester is nothing less than his own death! Therefore, he possesses the postmodern ironic twist: he has become the failed, doomed, postmodern hero. While discussing his impending demise, Lester adapts a matter-of-fact tone that seems to belie the serious nature of the event. His almost cheerfully philosophical attitude toward his doom intensifies as he begins to experience life for the first time since his youth. He develops an intense crush on his daughter's beautiful, sexy high school friend Angela (Thora Birch), then proceeds to enter into a full-fledged midlife crisis. He quits his job, then demands and receives a full-year's severance pay, starts an intensive gymnastic program, and discovers the joys of smoking marijuana from Ricky, a teenage boy who has just moved next door. Lester explains, "It's the weirdest thing, I feel I've been in a coma for about 20 years and I'm just waking up." Ricky's father, a right-wing Marine Corps Lt. Colonel, attempts to instill old-fashioned ideals of discipline in his young son. "You can't just go around doing whatever you feel like," Colonel Fitts explains, "There are rules in life." Both Ricky and Lester break these "rules" by smoking pot, listening to rock music, and indulging in toys like expensive video equipment. They seek freedom in order to enjoy life and presumably discover their ultimate destinies. Ricky's destiny is seemingly to be with Jane, Lester's daughter, and Lester's destiny is to free himself from both a deadening job and his wife's materialistic, sexless domination. Colonel Fitts eventually disowns Ricky and throws him out of the house, which is precisely what Ricky wants. The Colonel then murders Lester, fulfilling the latter's prophecy about death, but, surprisingly, Lester does not seem to find death to be so bad. One's life may flash by in the final second, Lester tells us at the end, but that final second "stretches out into an ocean of time." Lester admits that there are problems and disagreements on earth, but concludes "it's hard to stay mad when there's so much beauty in the world. I can't feel anything but gratitude for every moment of my stupid little life." This quasi new-age philosophy, softened though it is by a heavy dose of irony, may herald a new sense of optimism in postmodern films, but it is an optimism not of this world—a world rife with hatred, violence, and corruption—but of a realm after death, suggesting a "there'll be pie in the sky when you die" solution to the human condition. *American Beauty* preaches that though death is inevitable, what really matters is how one lives one's life. "Everything that is meant to happen does, eventually," explains Angela. So we should live life fully because life is filled with beauty, hence the title of this film.

Lester's fate contrasts sharply with that of Joe Gillis in *Sunset Boulevard*, though both heroes begin their stories with foreknowledge of their demise, the difference being that Lester seems happy with his fate, crying again and again just before he is shot that "I'm great! I'm great!" Joe's doom-laden confession at the beginning of Wilder's film strikes a strongly pessimistic chord, while Lester's spiritual theorizing is slightly reminiscent of New Age philosophy. Contemporary postmodern heroes may die like Lester, but there is still an undercurrent of redemption flowing throughout many of these narratives. Forties film noirs usually lack any sense of redemption; they are darker and more pessimistic than postmodern movies like *Pulp Fiction*, *Dream Lover*, and *American Beauty*. Other postmodern films like *Thelma and Louise*, *The Grifters* and *The Last*

Seduction offer bleaker, more cynical accounts of American life. These two different yet intersecting currents of postmodern cinema reveal similar divergences of views throughout American society as a whole. The less cynical and more optimistic tone of recent postmodern films like *American Beauty* may be symptomatic of the relative affluence of our times, though that too is fraught with its own contradictions. What seems clear is that postmodern heroes in many ways reflect the dominant contemporary popular mood of anxiety, despair, and cynicism regarding the future of American society.

Michael Medved bemoans today's postmodern anti-hero, preferring instead the modernist heroes of the past. "In years past, in the heyday of Gary Cooper and Greta Garbo, Jimmy Stewart and Katherine Hepburn, the movie business drew considerable criticism for manufacturing personalities who were larger than life," he writes. That situation, however, was nothing compared with the current crop of postmodern heroes who are "smaller than life. Less decent, less intelligent, and less likeable than our own friends and neighbors." Medved decries the fact that "Hollywood increasingly invests its most artistic aspirations in loathsome losers, disturbed and irresponsible misfits who give us little to care about and nothing to admire." ⁹ Actually, he makes the common mistake of confusing the author's thematic intentions with the traits of specific characters: thus, while Captain Ahab may be the twisted, tormented protagonist of *Moby Dick*, the belief that Melville hoped his readers would become just as insanely obsessed is of course preposterous. Authors and filmmakers establish characters that may or may not be intended as positive role models. In fact, many cinematic portraits are designed to shock or anger viewers regarding a depicted person or set of beliefs. Instead of decrying this kind of hero as a negative role model, Medved might better realize that such characters can make a poignant statement about contemporary life, for better or worse.

Postmodern heroes seem appropriate to a universe that is, in Hobbes' words, "nasty, brutish, and short." The postmodern universe is one filled with chaos, where truth is nowhere to be found and justice is singularly absent. In this universe traditional families have become the targets of satire and harsh criticism, while individuals appear to have lost the capacity to survive, much less the resources to triumph over great odds; the myriad obstacles seem to have become too daunting. As in classical film noir, the "evil" of postmodern cinema manifests itself at every social level, from government down to the individual psyche. This outlook has much in common with the existentialist tradition with its focus on the ambiguity, chaos, despair, and meaninglessness of existence.

The pessimism pervading most postmodern films, however, expressing fears, apprehensions, and a profound uneasiness regarding contemporary social institutions, the direction of current social trends, and humanity's ultimate fate may prove socially beneficial in the long run. For the most part, America expounds an optimistic philosophy where persistence pays off and talent and ability assures one of triumphs throughout life. This situation, of course, stems from Enlightenment optimism regarding progress. Society's "native optimism" reflects an underlying belief in the perfectibility of social institutions. Numerous clubs and societies exist that extol the benefits of optimism, but there are few that promote pessimism. Why do we not hear of a "Pessimists club" for example? The reason is that society values success and perceives optimism as the most effective mental attitude for our chronic low self-esteem and resulting ineptness and inertia. However, we might well question whether or not optimism is always the best course of action. There may be circumstances

in which a healthy pessimism would prove to be the wisest attitude. For instance, if an enterprise is doomed to failure for some reason, no amount of positive thinking can save it. Therefore, it may prove wiser to abandon the project and create a more effective one. Pessimism employed this way could prove useful and more pragmatic than our easily evoked optimism. Pessimistic films with failed heroes do suggest to audiences, by the very failure of their heroes, the necessity for broad social changes, or at least for alternate courses of personal action. Postmodern films may signal a changed, less optimistic attitude on the part of audiences and filmmakers. If so, we might expect significant changes in public opinion about existing institutions.

Just as postmodern heroes reflect pessimism about the chances to succeed in contemporary America, they also are prone to self-reflection and self-analysis. This is the reason for the doom-laden voice-over narration so common in neo-noirs and other postmodern genres. Protagonists of postmodern films seem almost obsessively self-absorbed and introspective, always ready to provide viewers with sophisticated analyses of just what went wrong and why they were doomed to failure. *Sunset Boulevard's* Joe calls himself a "poor dope," *Taxi Driver's* Travis complains "Loneliness has followed me my whole life. Everywhere. In bars, in cars, sidewalks, stores, everywhere. There's no escape," Travis laments that, "I'm God's lonely man." This kind of gut-wrenching, self-effacing narration, of course, would be unheard of in a modernist film. Imagine any one of the characters played by John Wayne or Gary Cooper being as vulnerable as the postmodern heroes. It is practically unthinkable, even a little humorous, to imagine modernist heroes baring their souls to the audience, yet that is precisely what postmodern characters do all the time, even when the subject is delicate and personal. *Blade Runner's* Deckard casually informs the audience: "Sushi, that's what my ex-wife called me. Cold fish." Woody Allen's protagonists are constantly confessing to the audience every feeling of inadequacy, and Oliver Stone's heroes are similarly eager to describe their failings and inner fears to the audience. Postmodern heroes not only fail to achieve their goals, often they blame themselves for their failures. Therefore they present a striking contrast to the traditional strong, silent hero of modernist films.

Even some contemporary modernist heroes have lately exhibited rather unusual (for modernist heroes) character traits. *The Patriot* and *The Gladiator*, two action films now in theatrical release, feature successful, modernist heroes with a patina of critical, even pacifistic views about war and personal violence. Mel Gibson plays Benjamin Martin, *The Patriot's* Revolutionary War hero who starts out as an opponent of war. The film's trailer chronicles the crimes that have been committed against Benjamin: "They threatened his family. They destroyed his home. They killed his child." After these attacks (by the British) Benjamin sheds his politically-correct pacifism and assumes the normal attitude of a modernist action hero: he kills very effectively. Similarly, *The Gladiator's* Maximus (Russell Crowe) pledges his life for ancient Rome, only to be forced into killing for his emperor. Both protagonists ultimately succeed, like good modernist heroes, but in order to do so they must overcome their anti-war feelings, no matter how admirable they may be, and assume the now-familiar role of macho action hero. These two films demonstrate that even modernist heroes evolve over time and come to reflect current social concerns, albeit only superficially.

Postmodern cinema furnishes a ringing critique of contemporary social life, culture, and politics that places it alongside existentialism, Hobbesian chaos theory, surrealism, and Marxism as a medium of expressing socio/political rebellion.

It serves to explode a good many powerful myths underlying contemporary society, especially those dwelling on the heroic struggles of individuals able to prevail against seemingly insurmountable odds, who, with just the right mixture of motivation and fortune, can alter the course of events. At the same time, by constructing heroes as complex individuals with an intricate combination of "good" and "evil" features, postmodern films depict human beings with more depth and realism than has been true of the general trajectory of mainstream Hollywood cinema. Many postmodern heroes, like Jake Gittes, Deckard, and Lester Burnam, exhibit serious, even fatal character flaws and personality defects, Jake's is being too weak and powerless to defeat the greed and lust of his antagonist (Noah Cross), Deckard's is being too emotionally cold, while Lester's is that he is so smitten with his sudden discovery of life's hidden beauty that he fails to save himself from the clutches of homophobic Col. Fitts. All of these heroes, like most heroes of postmodern films, illustrate the utter hopelessness and precariousness of the human condition. They are far removed from the traditional understanding of heroes—perhaps best articulated by Weber—that upholds the ideal of tenacious, victorious social actors who achieve great victories over opposing forces and are thereby able to restore order and stability in the world. Of course, the postmodern milieu contains no such stability or order; but rather only corruption, brutality, lust, greed, and destruction.

While heroes may face symbolic or real deaths in postmodern cinema, not all of these deaths are equally horrific. Thus Lester's death in *American Beauty* seems more like an apotheosis than a final death; though he ends up being shot and killed by an insane neighbor, he is so spiritually exuberant about his own demise that death presents itself much like a victory. Having learned some difficult lessons—above all to enjoy the beauty of life while avoiding needless stress—Lester has transcended his very need for "life." His story has a spiritual dimension that suggests, in effect, rebirth for those who fail to learn life's lessons quickly enough. But the life that Lester so willingly leaves behind is deeply flawed by homophobia, materialism, and sexual infidelity. Death becomes his only escape, so the film's optimism is certainly tempered with a large degree of irony. Despite this, *American Beauty* is much more optimistic than many of its bleak predecessors, including *The Grifters*, *The Last Seduction*, and *The Usual Suspects*, films that substituted antiheroes for traditional heroes. Possibly, *American Beauty* marks a turning away from pessimism toward a more New-Age style of optimism about the approaching Age of Aquarius, but such a conclusion is perhaps unwarranted. Beneath Lester's peace that passeth understanding lurks the film's deeply disturbing social issues. But we can still pose two questions: can postmodern heroes now be expected to achieve spiritual redemption despite their inevitable physical death? Can we expect more of these redeemed heroes who achieve salvation beyond the realm of the living? Or will we find, instead, an increased number of antiheroes like Wendy and Lily and a decrease of modernist heroes? Of course, only time will tell. We can surely look forward to a proliferation of future postmodern heroes whose very presence is likely to challenge the Enlightenment-oriented modernist, rationalist, predictable views of life.

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8. Woody Allen on Woody Allen: *In Conversation with Stig Bjorkman*, New York, Grove Press, 1993, 141.

9. Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs America*, New York, Harper Collins, 1992, p. 201.

Gladiator



Blade Runner



Chinatown



Saying it with flowers

by John Brown



What is *American Beauty* about?

It may seem an odd question to ask after the massive attention the film has received. The rapturous reviews, the huge and unexpected commercial success and the multiple Oscars—all of these would suggest that it's an easily accessible and transparent piece of work that requires little in the way of critical elucidation. In a sense that's true—I wouldn't claim that in what follows I'm pulling a deconstructionist rabbit out of the hat. But I do find it remarkable that such little attention has been paid to the quite radical view that *American Beauty* offers of the subject that emerges as its central theme: male sexuality.

One reason for the inattention may be the film's indirect approach to that theme. An opening voice-over by the central character Lester Burnham tells us that in less than a year he'll be dead—in fact, he goes on to say, in a way he's already dead. Combined with the first few scenes, this implies that the film is going to concern itself with the theme of alienation in a quasi-Marxist sense: a disabling sense of sterility and lack of meaning in relationships at home and at work. When Lester is then told by his new boss that the company intends to create savings by enforced redundancies and that his own post is threatened, a familiar story arc seems to be under construction—we can guess that after being fired Lester will be forced to create a different life for himself and his family and thus will discover a new and positive sense of identity.

This is the point, however, at which the film gets off the Hollywood rails and heads in another direction. It's true that Lester gets himself another job, at a local fast-food outlet. He does so by declaring his wish to have as little responsibility as possible—something that seems more than a little implausible, given the excessively positive corporate attitudes drilled into staff at such establishments.

But much more surprisingly, we see nothing of the relationships with fellow-workers which we might expect him to develop as a result; on the contrary, after he gets the job, we only see him there once, in the scene where his wife and her new lover arrive to order some food, giving Lester the chance

to embarrass them greatly by his insistence on serving them. (More implausibility here, it has to be said, and one of several sit-com tropes which are used in the film and reflect, possibly, screenwriter Alan Ball's previous work in the genre; for the scene to be credible, Lester's wife must be unaware of his employment there, which seems unlikely—otherwise surely under these circumstances she would have avoided it?)

It's also true that thanks to an accidental encounter with Ricky, the son of the family newly arrived next door, Lester starts smoking dope and trades in his car for a 1970s Pontiac Firebird, in apparent fulfilment of an old dream. But neither of these acts of personal revolt leads anywhere in terms of plot development—the car is seen only once and never driven, and the dope-smoking remains a solitary, private experience. All that Lester actually does in the rest of the film, in effect, is to proceed to get himself into better physical shape, as a consequence of becoming secretly infatuated with Angela, his teenage daughter's schoolfriend. Losing his job and getting a new one never interacts with his desire for her—there's no scene, for example, where she stops at the fast food outlet and is intrigued/appalled/delighted to discover her best friend's father working there, thus leading to a new phase in their relationship.

Indeed, *American Beauty* soon turns out to be almost entirely uninterested in the socio-economic consequences of Lester's situation. Once he's lost his job, the film seals him off from society, denying him friends, colleagues, comparable job opportunities, interests, hobbies or indeed any connection with a world beyond the street where he lives. This is expressed visually by the very restricted number of exteriors, by the austere decor of the interior sets and by the creation of formal tableaux as emblematic as an Edward Hopper painting—most obviously in the symmetrical Panavision framing of the dinner scenes.

But the film doesn't only present its characters as living in what appears to be a complete social, political and cultural vacuum—it also denies the audience any specific sense of time or

place beyond the frame. Thus in a more subtle way than *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show*, another two films with related themes, *American Beauty* turns out to be taking place not quite in the real world – more in a kind of alternative universe that mixes contemporary elements with old film and television images of the 1950s, the Golden Age of the Eisenhower years. It's not for nothing, one feels, that the *South Pacific* number "Bali Hai" is the theme song of dinners in the Burnham household.

In trying to categorise the film its director Sam Mendes has called it a fable. It's useful to remind ourselves that this used to mean a story with a moral—not so much an exhortation to act or think in a particular way as the illustration of the truth of a proposition. In fact, *American Beauty* turns out to be precisely that; its narrative sets out to demonstrate that all sexual relationships other than explicit and accepted homosexual ones between men are inherently flawed and doomed to failure.

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Although it's not immediately obvious that it's doing so, the film calls heterosexuality into question from almost the very beginning. As Lester masturbates in the shower and describes it as the highpoint of his day, it's clear that his marriage to Carolyn is in sexual as well as in other kinds of crisis. There are two occasions on which they refer to the subject: once when she recoils on finding him masturbating again, this time beside her in bed; and once when after having bought the car, he seems to recover his desire for her and makes an approach—which is cut short by a crass remark from her that gets one of the film's biggest laughs.

But in terms of the proposition that the film sets out to make, it seems significant that its one depiction of heterosexual intercourse should be played for (and get) an even bigger laugh. It occurs when Carolyn goes with her real estate rival and new lover Buddy Kane (whether or not this is her first venture into adultery is left unsaid) to a motel, and the image is a striking one: the camera frames Buddy's bare back centre frame so that all we see of Carolyn is the V-shape of her legs thrust ecstatically straight into the air.

As these two instances suggest, the film depicts Carolyn with almost unrelenting hostility. From her first appearance, (cutting American beauty roses in matching garden gloves and shoes, as Lester points out for our amusement) to her penultimate one (driving her car through a rainstorm, shouting and screaming like a banshee with a gun on the seat beside her) Carolyn is presented almost entirely as a grotesque—a maniacally driven career woman who is largely responsible for Lester's misery. The misogyny which *American Beauty* exhibits is not limited to Carolyn, but it reaches its nadir in the sequence where she is shown undressing before cleaning a house which she is about to show to clients. These images suggest her readiness to play both domestic slave and prostitute, but in case we're still in any doubt as to what view we should take of her values, she's also made during these scenes to repeat over and over again her career mantra.

The attack on Carolyn is in some way made even worse by her brief breakdown in tears and her assertion of sheer will in recovering from it. To describe the moment in this way is to make it seem like a moment in which we are asked or encouraged to feel sympathy for her—but instead the tears function as an indicator of vestigial humanity which the film then shows as being ruthlessly stamped out by Carolyn herself in her determination to succeed as a businesswoman. When this is put alongside the grovelling way that she is made to behave towards the equally grotesque Buddy Kane, Carolyn can claim to be the most demonised wife and mother in American movies since the Mary Tyler Moore character in *Ordinary People*. Both movies make a point of consistently blocking the audience's

sympathy and understanding for the person who arguably needs it most.

Of the three other women characters in the film, Barbara Fitts is given essentially one note to strike—paralysed fear of her husband, Marine Corps colonel Frank—and on her few appearances is presented with what seems like slightly contemptuous pity. Lester's daughter Jane and her friend Angela are depicted, on the other hand, in what seem initially as more sympathetic terms.

Jane's face is in fact the first image that we see in the film; recorded on video by an off-screen Ricky, she talks scathingly of her father and responds with a mixture of excitement and wariness to Ricky's suggestion that Lester should be killed. There's no reason for this scene to be positioned so far out of sequence (chronologically it belongs in the second half of the film) except as a device to set up a degree of tension around Lester's death and pose a question which will not be answered until the final moments of the film: at whose hands will he meet the death foretold—daughter's, wife's, his own?

But the immediate side effect of this positioning in terms of Jane's character and situation is to suggest that she is a victim—if she can fantasise in this way, surely it must point to some terrible trauma in her upbringing. No such backstory emerges, however, and we are left with a character about whom the film seems deeply ambivalent. On the one hand she never hides her (mostly negative) feelings, which is implied to be a plus in comparison to her parents; on the other hand her rebellion seems rooted in nothing more substantial than style—she shows no desire to reject the comforts of home, and her essential criticism of Lester and Carolyn is that they are embarrassingly uncool.

The significance of Jane's relationship with Ricky is even more difficult to interpret, mainly because the film seems so determined to idealise him. Not only is he young and handsome, with a warm intent gaze that suggests an inner calm and secure sense of identity, but he's also quick-witted in both senses of the word (as when his father spouts some crudely homophobic remarks) and devoted to non-violence and conciliation (as when his father later attacks him). His dope-dealing is restricted to a socially acceptable drug which he seems able to obtain without ever being contaminated by the criminal world with which he presumably does business; he also has a strong line in moral judgment, a point to be dealt with later, and a serious interest in art—although how far this extends beyond the stoned hippie theory and practice of aesthetics ("everything's beautiful if you only know how to look at it") is unclear.

The relationship between Jane and this paragon, however, is more passive than passionate. His nakedness in one scene with her is presumably confirmation that they have sex, but with one exception they never show or express any sexual desire for each other. The exception is the scene where Jane exposes her breasts at her bedroom window, and it seems significant that this moment involves the video-camera with which Ricky initiates their relationship—they consistently seem more interested in responding to each other through the mediation of the image than as flesh-and-blood individuals.

The overall effect is thus of a relationship which positions them more as soulmates or spiritual brother and sister than as impassioned teenage lovers, and the film's contrasting depiction of Angela strengthens the impression that whatever Ricky and Jane mean to each other, sex doesn't have much of a role to play in their relationship. First seen through Lester's transfixed gaze as the erotic adolescent dream of the perfect cheerleader, Angela talks almost incessantly of sex and flirts openly with Lester—to Jane's increasing discomfort on both fronts. This could have been presented in a relatively positive, liberating way, but instead the film insists on depicting Angela as a shallow, self-obsessed and self-deluding character—a critical

portrayal which culminates in Ricky's devastatingly savage put-down of her towards the end of the film. If the film doesn't endorse his view of Angela, it certainly fails to indicate its dis-sent.

The result of this in relation to Lester is that his adoration of Angela is critically undermined from the start. We know that she's far from being the ideal which even his mild fantasies construct, but it seems crucial to the film's sexual politics that his decision not to have sex with her should be based on his continuing idealisation of her, rather than on a realisation of her naiveté and immaturity.

Thus the point of this heterosexual infatuation seems to be that where stupid but sexually attractive young girls are involved, even an intelligent man like Lester can make a complete fool of himself. Perhaps his final interior speech about the hitherto unrecognised beauty in his life is meant to be taken as a satirical illustration of his self-delusion – it's otherwise inexplicable in terms of his experience in the film.

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If heterosexuality is thus presented in *American Beauty* as consistently problematic, without a single positive example, how does the film characterise homosexuality? Its single instance of female homosexuality—the couple who come to view the house that Carolyn is selling—is negative, to say the least; the two women are cast as unattractively middle-aged and depicted as aggressive and suspicious, with no suggestion of any warmth between them. Much as the film dislikes Carolyn, it seems briefly to prefer her to them.

But male homosexuality is presented in a far more favourable light in the case of the Burnhams' middle-aged neighbours, Jim and Jim. Not only are they good-looking, well-preserved and immaculately dressed; they are also caring (as in their gift to the newly arrived Fitts) and calm and collected in the face of a hostility that doesn't have the nerve to become explicit homophobia (as in Frank's cold, mocking questions about their status as 'partners').

Yet however positively presented, Jim and Jim remain on the margins of the film. The essence of what the film has to say about male sexuality relates to the inside of the closet rather than the outside, most obviously in the character of Frank, whose contempt for the two Jims and rigid sense of his own patriarchal masculinity can be read from the outset as signs of his being in denial. But what the film does with this is genuinely striking and surprising; rather than have Frank proceed to kill Lester because he thinks (through a misreading of key images) that Lester and Ricky are having sex, those misread images have the effect of bringing Frank out of the closet and into Lester's surprised and tentative arms.

Is this simply a foolish mistake on Frank's part, a dark deployment of another familiar sit-com trope? *American Beauty*'s portrayal of Lester's sexuality is superficially unquestioning, but there are hints that he may be as repressed as Frank, albeit in different ways.

One indicator is the presentation of his decision to get into shape; creating a secret space in his garage rather than going to a gym, his exercises are depicted increasingly in terms of body-building, frequently a coded image for homosexuality in the 1950s Hollywood to which the film stylistically refers. Another is the nature of Lester's fantasies about Angela, where she is consistently associated with red roses—not only do the images suggest an attraction which is sentimentally romantic rather than physical, but they also link her to Carolyn's first appearance and Lester's failure to maintain sexual relations with her. And in comparison to the quickness with which Lester turns away from Carolyn after her two rebuffs, there is the ease and pleasure he obviously finds in his conversations with Ricky, where references to dope seem to hover on the edge of double

meanings—Ricky's first line to Lester, a stranger to him at that point, is "Do you like to party, sir?"

Finally, there is something admittedly more subjective: the complexity of the expressions on Kevin Spacey's face as he offers comfort to Frank, is kissed by him and then ever so gently pulls back. It's also noticeable that the subsequent line, "I think you've made a mistake", is delivered by Spacey in a far from confident or definite way. It could mean that Lester isn't homosexual; but it could also mean simply that he has realised that he isn't sufficiently attracted to Frank to want such a relationship with him – Ricky, for example, might receive a different answer on a different day. In terms of what I've argued is the film's thesis about male sexuality, what happens to Lester and Frank thus becomes a kind of worst-case scenario.

But if *American Beauty* is remarkably rigorous in handling its thesis, it becomes much less coherent or specific when attempting to suggest why we should accept the thesis as true. The failure of heterosexuality, for example, seems simply to be taken for granted, as if it were something that needs no further comment. On the other hand, there's just the hint of a rationale for the other side of the argument in the oblique parallel established between Lester and Frank – that they are both essentially in limbo because they're out of work. True, Lester has a job at the fast food outlet, but he makes it clear that he regards this as the opposite of his previous career. In Frank's case, it's not clear what his current service status is, but he's at home all the time as far as we can see, which implies that he's been invalidated out, retired or at least no longer on active service.

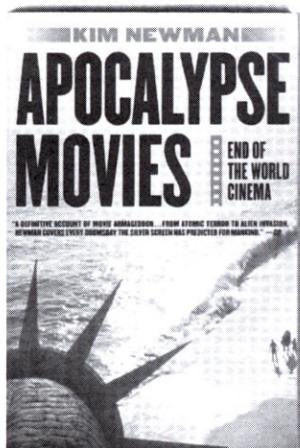
Thus in retrospect, the film seems to be suggesting by this that as long as Lester and Frank have allowed themselves to be defined by male patriarchal structures (in this case, the family, capitalism and the armed forces) they've been forced to deny themselves any exploration of their sexuality beyond the social 'norm'. Beyond this suggestion, of course, lies Freud's idea of polymorphous perversity and its progressive distortion by the process of social construction, and that provides a kind of answer to the question raised at the beginning—*American Beauty* is an attempt to deal with gay desire without becoming, reductively speaking, simply a film about homosexuals (whether a social issue film like *Making Love*, a gay celebration movie like *La Cage aux Folles* or one of the various other genre models).

But there's a problem with accepting this rationale, and it's personified, of course, in Jim and Jim. At one level they're crucial to the film's argument, in that they provide a positive model of men at ease with and fulfilled by their homosexuality. But their existence also creates a problem in the logic of the film's argument – how have they, as men in professional careers, escaped the restraints which have shaped Lester and Frank? Perhaps we're meant to take a critical view of their suburban cosiness—as opposed, say, to the tortured depths of real emotion in Frank—but it still remains a central issue, and one which the film damagingly chooses to evade.

Indeed, the overall problem with *American Beauty* is that as subtle and radical as it is in some respects, it's also often astonishingly crude and reactionary in others – most obviously in its misogyny and in the way that it loads the dice against heterosexuality as cynically as they used to be loaded against homosexuality in the vast majority of Hollywood movies. If the sympathy and insight granted to Lester and Frank had been extended to all the characters, the result might have been a landmark Hollywood film; as it stands, *American Beauty*'s faults and evasions almost cancel out its thematic boldness.

But that boldness, however qualified, should still have been recognised and debated much more than has been the case.

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Apocalypse Movies: End of the World Cinema

by Kim Newman
New York, N.Y.:

St. Martin's Griffin Press, 2000
272 pages with index and
bibliography (Can) \$ 25.99
ISBN 0-312-25369-9 (paper)

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Movies: End of the World Cinema
London: Titan Press, 1999

by John McCullough

Kim Newman's *Apocalypse Movies* is not much of a film studies text, really, and it is not even much of a book. I make the distinction because, in the area of film studies, one tends to expect very little in terms of critical thought although there are many books written about films that prove to be examples of good writing with a thorough attention to the crafts of organization, cataloguing and sometimes exciting analysis. As an exemplary instance of this type of film studies book I would point to Michael Wood's *America in the Movies* (New York: Basic Books, 1975) which always pulls its punches when it comes to crucial insights but is nonetheless thoughtfully constructed and leads the reader to suggestive insights about films

and culture. Similarly, and more relevant to the current discussion, Annette Kuhn's second anthology of essays about SF films (*Alien Zone II* (New York: Verso, 1999)) dedicates itself to presenting essays which exhibit some intellectual rigour and pertinent analysis of the relations between art, entertainment and culture. These books have the distinction of reading like fully-realized projects and, in this sense, they can easily find a place on the shelf of film studies research.

Newman's work, by contrast, is a hodge-podge of opportunistic commentaries on the millennium and apocalypse, generally, such that it is difficult to see it as a completed project of film studies, let alone a finished book. But one can speculate that this has more to do with the contemporary publishing industry than it has to do with the state of film studies or Newman's writing and critical acumen for he has been published previously and his contribution to Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's *Oxford History of World Cinema* (London: Oxford University Press, 1996) is a competent overview of the theme of exploitation in contemporary America movies. In fact, he seems well-suited to the topic of apocalypse movies as his previous research has covered similar material.

The initial difficulty with the current book is organizational. For instance, atomic catastrophe fuels much of the social anxiety which Newman perceives in the movies he catalogues. But it is unclear why a chapter titled "Mutants and Monsters" should be differentiated from the next chapter "Norms vs[sic] Mutates" or, later in the book, the chapters "Learning to Love the Bomb" or "The Atom Strikes Back". While there is something like a timeline which Newman respects, he often veers wildly off course in order to indicate that a theme which he has particularized as temporal nonetheless has poignancy in another era. So, in a chapter called "The Atomic Decade" which is ostensibly dedicated to films from the 1950s, the author confuses matters by discussing changes to the theme in the 1960s and then discusses films from the 1980s and 1990s.

Such free-floating analysis encourages Newman to make audacious but highly inaccurate analyses. For example, he claims that "the expressionist, free-

way-strangled Los Angeles we see a-borning in Robert Zemeckis's [sic] *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* [sic] (1988) and Jack Nicholson's *The Two Jakes* (1990), both of which feature significant explosions, is the first truly post-atomic city." (p.65) But Newman, 20 pages earlier, has already made mention of other post-atomic cities in his references to Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (France/Japan, 1959) as well as those cities featured in what he describes as "a well-established cycle of Japanese films that tackle the after-effects of the bombings".(p.43) So it is difficult to take his commentary or analysis very seriously. It seems that the author would like to appear multivalent and maybe even dialogical in his approach but, ultimately, it becomes difficult to discern whether this work is an example of postmodern criticism or just muddle-headed writing.

As catastrophic as Newman's analysis is, there remains, for the reader, the actual theme of apocalypse which can never exhaust its power as a story about the future. It is said that all societies have stories about their beginnings and warnings about how it could all end. With this in mind, it is not a matter of frivolous observation to interpret our society's narratives of "the end of days". Typically, liberal sociological analyses of culture, and Newman's work would fit here, tend to miss the opportunity to fully comprehend the cultural figures of crisis. More often than not, the trajectory of such analysis leads to thinking about cultural trends as superficial and idiosyncratic blips on a meter which is rarely connected to interpretations of the political economy of the times.

This approach has led to the recurring tendency to see *Blade Runner* (US, 1982, Ridley Scott), for instance, as a useful and accurate depiction of a future dystopian American society. It is only Mike Davis, in his *Ecology of Fear* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), who has corrected this liberal view by claiming that the film's imaging of a future LA is wholly inaccurate and unacceptable. Davis argues that the film's vision is ultimately the product of idealist and abstracted fictions which cover over the actual tendencies of a contemporary society which, in its present state, provides plenty of cues as to how LA will 'be' in the future.

In assuming a liberal critical stance, it is not surprising that Newman's book

tends to regularly misread the signs of the future. It is evident in the choice of films which Newman studies. For instance, the most explicit contemporary film about the apocalypse as it is conjured in Judeo-Christian mythology, *The Rapture* (US, 1991, Michael Tolkin), is given a few words of commentary but the author refuses to see the film as radical social critique. But for Florence Jacobowitz' feminist and socialist criticism this cultural artifact is not about the obsequious re-telling of God's story but the schematic skewering of "evangelical fundamentalism as a symptom and manifestation of a society which buries women alive."¹ If Newman misses his opportunity to read films as fully ideological, then it is not surprising that he avoids committed analysis of films like *Day of the Dead* (US, 1985, George Romero) and entirely passes over *Born in Flames* (US, 1983, Lizzie Borden) and *They Live!* (US, 1988, John Carpenter). The idea that culture could have anything significant to articulate about the society from which it emerges appears to be too big a step for Newman's stride.

Rather than lament the baby-steps which are the hallmark of liberal criticism it would be beneficial to point to some of the areas which animate society's interest in the phenomenon of apocalypse. The immediate issue to deal

with is the fact that with the passing of 1999, within the context of consumer capitalism, everyone and their dog was promoting something millennial. Whether it was Professor Mark Kingwell, the University of Toronto philosopher cum huckster (or is it the other way around) or the media's Y2K-watch or the return to survivalist shelter frenzy, the theme of epochal catastrophe rang through the media and checkout scanners from the White House podium to the West Samoa Hilton (where the 24-hour coverage of New Year's Eve finally wound down). The alignment of anxiety and promotion never seemed so thorough as it did when CNN's Bernard Shaw had to report that nothing unusual was happening in Times Square but that one should always be aware that LA was only three hours away, and crisis could be just around the next ad break.

For most in the First World, the millennium was palpable and the shadow cast by that figure was surely felt to be the apocalypse. But promotion seems ephemeral in the context of time. Material history tends to erase the marketers' claims and many fans of the potential crisis would now find it difficult to name the year in which all that happened. Movies were certainly marketed on the basis of millennial interest and hysteria but, outside of *Armageddon* (US, 1998, Michael Bay), many of these works are lost in the peripheral fallout of Y2K overexposure and indifference.

More engaging, in terms of the sustained interest in apocalypse in Hollywood, are a series of observations which can be made about the logic of the industry and the tendencies of the social order to which that industry plays. First, it should be recognised that the apocalypse film tends to be an action film and, in this light, it would be useful to consider apocalypse as a predictable development of the action film's dependence on the narrative of crisis. Furthermore, as several commentators have mentioned, the blockbuster action film is not so much dedicated to narrative complexity or even consistency but to the concept of spectacle. So the immediate competition for blockbusters, in terms of disposable leisure-time dollars spent, is not the other types of films in the market but the thrill rides at theme parks and other vacation or distraction activities like extreme sports and exotic holidays.

It follows that the promise of visceral and emotional impact is crucial in attaining a respectable market share and shelf life for movie product. This tendency in the industry emerged with the success of *Jaws* (US, 1975, Steven Spielberg) which promised a trip to the beach at a fraction of the cost and, crucially, an extraordinary crisis experienced close-up and personal, as we now like to say. If contemporary blockbusters, and hence the majority of Hollywood's resources, seem to be overwhelmingly dedicated to crisis-filled expositions of the end of the world this should be seen to be a direct result of the industry's standard operating procedure.

While an institutional analysis can generate some relevant initial insights into the nature of contemporary Hollywood production patterns, recent trends should also be related to the market's perceived willingness to sustain an affection for overwhelmingly dystopian sentiments and stories. One could argue that there is a decidedly downbeat social imaginary which pervades the blockbusters even while they seem to include significant platitudes to utopian heroism. Bruce Willis' character in *Armageddon*, for instance, saves the day but happily and willingly dies for the cause. Moreover, as spectators, we are encouraged to share in his demise as we hunker down with him on the bright side of the 'roid to contemplate the little blue planet.

Notably, this nihilist tendency in the apocalypse films is not restricted to the action film. We see it in a series of melodramas dealing specifically with professionals in crisis. A good example is Harrison Ford's character in *Regarding Henry* (US, 1991, Mike Nichols) who is shot in a random act of urban violence and is left in a blubbering infantile state of helplessness. Extraordinary punishment and devolution, the film argues, is mandatory for his regeneration as a compassionate human. The basic storyline is repeated throughout the 1990s and eventuates in *What Dreams May Come* (US, 1998, Vincent Ward) and *Fight Club* (US, 1999, David Fincher), for instance. This group of melodramas is substantial (both in terms of numbers produced and prominence in the market) and, while it is clearly an attempt to redeem yuppie greed and malfeasance, it suggests a curious and nihilist moral-

Mars Attacks



ty which obliges the viewer to harm young professionals in order to humanize them. In the case of *Armageddon*, Willis' character shares many characteristics with these yuppies, as he is an abrasive entrepreneur and owner who finds redemption for his insensitivity on the earth by finding death on an orbiting spacerock.

The overwhelming fetishization of professionals and owners in contemporary Hollywood contrasts significantly with earlier periods of the entertainment industry. No doubt this reflects a change in the perceived demographic for the movies (and this would also suggest why movie prices are now so exorbitant) but there may be more to this than is immediately apparent. The fixation on professionals and their crises should also be seen in light of who it is that makes the movies. That is to say, when Hollywood movies were made as part of a factory system, by and for markets which recognized their status as working-class and middle-class, the stories which were told were symptomatic of their labour relations and their social relations.

In the New Hollywood, workers are identified as free-lance specialists and this implies that they are owners of their own special skills. They are representatives of a skilled professional class and not an organized worker class. In fact, given that the work itself has become increasingly capital-intensive and structured around intellectual labour, and not factory or manual labour, these workers rarely identify themselves as a class of craft guild workers. Ultimately, because they regularly form their own companies (for tax and esteem purposes), this group of workers tend to identify themselves as professionals and, increasingly, as owners.

Furthermore, the films made by these workers tend to be directed to an audience which similarly identifies with professional and owner lifestyles. This has to do with changes in our culture, since World War II, as labour in the North has become intensively white-collar service production in contrast to the earlier stereotype of blue-collar commodity production.² As well, film production has come under the influence of consumerism to the extent that, like television production, the sale of goods has gained prominence in the actual look and feel of movies. This is most



crassly exhibited in product placement but it is also useful to note that the sets, locations, props, designs and special effects in movies are now connected not necessarily to narrative but to lifestyle promotion and the development of a sustained "buying mood."³ A consequence of these changes, then, is that the ideological field which is most prominent is one which confers legitimization on the professional and owner classes. This necessarily tends to eclipse the presence of labour and the working class (both in substance and concept).

Shifts of emphasis and radical changes to the First World's political economy in the last fifty years can be seen to be directly associated with the foregrounding of stories of professionals and owners in crisis. More often than not, in order to capture audience attention, these crises are exaggerated and they take on the shape of apocalypse. That these stories have come to achieve hegemony in contemporary culture is intimately connected to complex arrangements of ideological, cultural and institutional meanings. These meanings tend to be contested but, in this period, one could argue that an historical bloc, as Gramsci would call it, or a structure of feeling, as Raymond Williams would name it, has been established which, in its process and its institutional and ideological fixtures and preferences, is articulated in the wide range of artifacts which circulate daily.

To rely on liberal sociological critical tools to decipher the world of apocalyp-

tic movies, as Kim Newman does, is to remain complicit with dominant class interests. The results are a series of tepid observations which do nothing but promote the idea of witty self-promotion which, in turn, legitimates the sense that management of knowledge is preferable to the acquisition of knowledge. By contrast, it has been the century long goal of Marxist cultural criticism, sometimes called cultural materialism, to explode sociology's fascination with social crisis and move beyond the attendant confusion, cynicism and nihilism which such projects engender, to an acknowledgement that what exists does not rule over us but works around us. And this realization encourages, if not utopian leanings, then, at the very least, a sense of social purpose when dealing with dystopia and apocalypse. That is, to look for openings at closing time.

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1. Florence Jacobowitz, "The Rapture: A Woman's Film of the 90's," *Cineaction* 29, Fall 1992, 21.

2. Stephen Wood, ed. *The Transformation of Work?: Skill, Flexibility and the Labour Process* (New York: Routledge, 1989) and Stanley Aronowitz and Jonathan Culler, eds. *Post-Work: The Wages of Cybernation* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

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SOME ARBITRARY FORAYS INT(T)



The King is Alive

by **Robin Wood**

With over three hundred films over a period of twelve days it has become impossible to cover the Toronto Film Festival. It seems legitimate, however, to begin by foregrounding some of the problems and the decisions with which one solves them. First, then, how many films can one hope to absorb and do some kind of rough justice to over so brief a period? I limited myself to about twenty-five and around day ten felt completely exhausted. I slept through an hour of *Burnt Money*, a film to which I had been particularly looking forward and which is, obviously, on the strength of its last forty minutes, striking and distinguished, but it would be thoroughly irresponsible of me to attempt any sort of evaluation beyond that. Members of the local press managed to give the impression that they had of course seen everything and threw out judgments accordingly, without (as far as I

am aware) anywhere mentioning two of the three films I saw that seemed to me (at the time, and still on calmer reflection) indisputable masterpieces (neither of their press screenings was well attended, while a number of screenings of quite minor works were impossible to get into—it would be interesting to learn on what basis our supposedly influential journalist-critics make their choices).

Obviously, with so many films, choice is the primary problem. The festival catalogue is no help at all, since its compilers find it necessary to champion every film as having extraordinary claims on one's attention and being beyond any hint of adverse criticism—it would be nice if, just occasionally, one read something like 'This is a decent little film that you will probably enjoy, and, although no earth-shaking masterpiece, we feel it deserves inclusion.' One is inevitably guided by personal bias in some form or another—the presence of directors, stars, genres or subject-matter in

which one is interested. I made it a principle (though I did not adhere to it rigorously) to avoid films I knew would open theatrically—why miss films one may never get another chance to see for films that will be in one's local theatre within a few weeks or months? Hence I did not go to Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* despite the fact that it is one of the films I most look forward to. Choice will also be determined by the merest expediency: with press screenings overlapping, as many as four films showing simultaneously in different auditoriums, one may be forced to miss films high on one's list of priorities and see films of which one has no particular expectations simply because they are on at a convenient time. There are other guidelines: one likes when possible to see films by new directors; and one has today (as at previous periods in film history) the sense that exciting things are happening in certain parts of the world, pockets of creativity arising from some not-easily-identifiable

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set of cultural/social/political/artistic circumstances that both feed and are fed by the creativity of individual auteurs: Taiwan; Asia more generally; Iran; Northern Europe (Denmark and upwards, Iceland included).

What follows, then, is a partial and personal series of probes into individual films or themes arising from the various groupings into which one sorts them. All judgements are to be taken as strictly provisional. I saw each film only once, and it is quite impossible (and highly reprehensible) to offer some kind of confident pontification on a film of any real interest that one has seen less than three times. I recently realized that a majority of the films from the past that I have come to value most highly were films I actively disliked on first viewing (these include, for example, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *Vertigo*, *La Regle du Jeu*, and *Heaven's Gate*—only for the first can I plead the excuse of youth, Ophuls' masterpiece being not easily accessible for an eighteen-year-old kid). I am adopting a starring system, previously unheard of in *CineAction* and employed here for mere convenience without consulting other members of the collective, who may well vote me off the board when they see that I have stooped to such a thing. But I am not trying to create a precedent but merely falling back on a convenient shorthand. The three films referred to above are identified with five stars; films below three I consider unworthy to be shown in a festival.

Dogme and Dogme-tism

We have now had four films (of very varying quality) that bear the official Dogme stamp of approval, and it seems a good moment to discuss briefly the status of this movement today. First, it is difficult to be certain exactly how seriously it was intended by its original signatories, though I have the feeling that Lars von Trier (for instance) meant it somewhat more dogmatically than (for instance) Thomas Vinterberg, who was already permitting himself liberties in *The Celebration* ('Dogme 1'). For me, Dogme has represented an admirable—and salutary intervention in contemporary cinema—no more but no less. If

it were taken as 'the way all of us must now make films' its effect could only be disastrous, the substitution of one artistic straitjacket for those already dominant. Dogme does not destroy or avoid cinematic conventions (as has sometimes been assumed), it merely privileges one particular set over the others, a set that already has a history (Italian neo-realism to some extent, but more especially the films of Cassavetes). Every set of conventions carries within it its own collection of signifiers, that of Dogme being 'reality', 'natural behaviour', 'spontaneity', 'slice of life', etc... ('reality' is never to be confused with reality). With this, however, goes the insistence upon a hand-held camera, which creates a very interesting tension. No other method of filmmaking is so insistently and pervasively obtrusive, so while we are given the sense that we are being presented with (as near as possible) raw 'reality' in all its immediacy, we are also aware that it is being filmed, that it is presented through an intermediary, the guy jerking the camera around. In the majority of Dogme (or Dogme-related) films so far, the jerky movements from face to face in the filmmaker's rush to capture the next expression or gesture actually become a distraction, even an annoyance (if we allow ourselves to become annoyed).

The very first film I saw, a Canadian comedy called *Low Self Esteem Girl*, is exemplary here. It is not a Dogme film in name. Indeed, its creator, Blaine Thurier, may not even have heard of Dogme, as the catalogue informs us that he had...no training—just instincts and a knapsack' (presumably the knapsack, at least, came in useful). It does, however, scrupulously follow the rules: hand-held camera throughout, improvisation, real locations and apartments, etc.. (Thurier does, however, have his name on it, but the pretence of anonymity has always seemed a mere Dogme affectation, somewhat ridiculous, as everyone knows who made the films, and their directors go around film festivals giving interviews about them). I do not know how much of the film was actually improvised. The most satisfying of the first three Dogme films (perhaps because the least 'Dogmatic?') surely remains the first,

Vinterberg' *The Celebration*, and we have the filmmaker's word for it that it was scripted throughout: the actors were *acting* 'improvisation'. If the same is true of *Low Self Esteem Girl* the illusion is even more complete: the film looks improvised to and beyond the point of delirium, the chief result being an inordinate amount of grinning and giggling that becomes wearying after the first ten minutes, nothing making for greater selfconsciousness than the command 'Improvize!!'. It took me twenty minutes to realize that the film was supposed to be a comedy. It is easy to see, in retrospect, that it is *written* as one. The problem is that the highly stylized conventions of comedy precision (the precise framing of a shot, the precise timing of a cut, the precise angle from which a character is viewed), nuance, the actors' timing of gesture and expression, the intonation of a word or phrase, the preservation of a certain distance—are totally incompatible with (are indeed the exact opposite of) the conventions of Dogme. There is no need to adduce here *The Awful Truth* or *Bringing Up Baby*—even the feeblest of the Laurel and Hardy shorts would serve as demonstration. Hand-held full-face jerky closeups of people giggling and grimacing are simply not very funny. I don't say these things to be unkind to Mr. Thurier (I think it was unkind to show his film in a festival), whose work as a Vancouver 'underground cartoonist' may well be excellent. I want simply to draw attention to the limitations of Dogme filmmaking and to stress that it offers only an alternative set of filmic conventions, not an 'answer' to all the problems of contemporary film production.

Pass, then, from the kind of thing that could give Dogme a bad name to the movement's triumphant vindication, this year's official Dogme entry *The King Is Alive* (★★★★★) The film's precise relationship to the Dogme rules seems to me complex. I will take it on trust that the main body of the film, at least, was shot consistently with a hand-held camera, though much of the time I would not have guessed this, so steady are the hands holding it. Numerous shots look carefully composed, using objects and lights (within



The King is Alive

the image) to frame or to direct the eye. This enables the 'anonymous' director/co-screenwriter Kristian Levring to structure the film upon a range of stylistic decisions: occasional 'punctuation' landscape shots that are absolutely steady (dare I risk a small bet that Levring cheated here at least?), other punctuating moments from forward moving vehicles, including one aerial view (well, someone may have been holding the camera *in* the plane...), the more familiar rough, obtrusively hand-held movements for scenes of panic, hysteria or rage. There are also extreme deep-focus compositions, with foreground and far background strikingly clear.

This, for me, was the festival's most overwhelming emotional experience. We may, I think, assume that it will get at least a limited art-house release (if only on the strength of its 'name' cast, including Romane Bohringer, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Janet McTeer, Bruce Davison), although no Canadian distributor is listed in the catalogue, so a calmer, more considered reassessment should be possible later, but I can't imagine changing my mind about it greatly. Levring's intelligence is demonstrable at all points in his control of extremely complex and explosive material: control and intensity conjoined to their mutual benefit. The ensemble cast (if there are stars, there are no 'star' performances) is uniformly superb. The premise (holiday-makers stranded in the desert, facing starvation, dehydration and probable death,

persuaded by one who happens to have worked in theatre to put on an amateur performance of *King Lear* from his uncertain memory of Shakespeare's text) may sound implausible, pretentious and ridiculous on paper but becomes, in the realization, not only credible but almost inevitable, a triumph of common sense *in extremis*, a means of preserving sanity whilst confronting the realities of an intolerable situation. The relationship between play and real-life situation never becomes simplistic—there are no attempts to draw close parallels, to fit actor to character in any neat way. The parallels that arise are more general and more resonant: the stripping away of 'civilized' pretences, pretensions and image, the exposure of 'human nature' in its contemporary, culturally determined manifestations (complex and disturbing issues of race and gender insistently erupting), the relentless testing of character and behaviour. The film's final sequences are almost unbearably moving. I find its neglect (to describe attendance at the press screening as 'sparse' would be an overstatement, and so far I have found no one else who saw it) incomprehensible.

O Canada!

I couldn't help laughing aloud when I saw the listing for advance (pre-festival) press screenings: the first two films listed were *Low Self Esteem Girl* and *We All Fall Down* and with those titles they just had to be Canadian. Despite a general belief to the contrary, I do take an

interest in the cinema of my adoptive country: I have lived here now for twenty-three years and, in so far as I think of myself as having a nationality, I regard myself as Canadian. The interest is, however, inclined to be spasmodic and proves difficult to sustain over long periods, the most interesting works (Egoyan apart) being small, largely ignored films like *Joe's So Mean to Josephine* and *Kitchen Party*. On the face of it, there seems no good reason why Canada should not have as active, vibrant and flourishing a film industry as Taiwan or Iran, yet where are our Hou and our Yangs, our Kiarostamis and Makhmalbafis? Egoyan, of course, continues his solitary battle with integrity and distinction, yet even he and Cronenberg have shown an increasing tendency to look outside, to make films that are no longer rooted in their home culture. The big question is, and always has been, does Canada have a 'home' culture?—has not American cultural imperialism long since stifled any clear indigenous growth? The great majority of Canadian films seem to suffer from an inferiority complex—with low self esteem we all fall down. Part of the problem seems to be the decisions and priorities of the various funding organizations. I am not qualified to speak of these, but I think it is high time someone in a position (and with the time and energy) to gather the necessary information undertook a detailed critical study of film financing in Canada over the past decade. I shall remark here only that William MacGillivray, the director of what I still consider the finest of all Canadian feature films, *Life Classes*, which he followed with the admirable *Understanding Bliss*, has been kicking his heels for four years now with an excellent screenplay (he let me read it) that admittedly requires a larger (though still by no means exorbitant) budget than his earlier works, and has been unable to secure funding. True, MacGillivray's films have not made money. Neither did the early works of Ingmar Bergman, yet Svenskfilm-industri recognized his importance and supported him through a whole series of financial failures. If Bergman's situation had resembled that of contemporary Canadians the world would not now have *Wild Strawberries*, *The*



Silence or Fanny and Alexander.

Meanwhile, the end credits of the most obviously meretricious projects (which don't make money either) acknowledge funding from a range of sources.

Beyond that, however, remains the much larger and less obviously remediable problem of our relationship to the United States. (It will be clear, I hope, that I speak here of English-speaking Canada; the problem is of course far less severe for Quebec, which has its own language, its own strong cultural roots, and, significantly, a far more coherent and developed cinema). During my first years here I heard much talk of the need to preserve (or develop?) a strong national culture distinct from that of our terrifyingly powerful neighbour. It seems to me I hear much less of this today, as if most of its proponents have quietly acknowledged defeat while continuing impotently to deplore the situation. A disastrous side-effect of this anti-Americanism has been a general tendency to denigrate and sweep aside the great achievements of the Hollywood

cinema (when there still was one that could be discussed in other than negative terms)—disastrous, because there is so much for young filmmakers to learn from them. When I have taught courses on Hollywood I have discovered rapidly that the students' expectation is that the course will consist of an attack and demolition, and many have found it next to impossible to adjust to the series of masterpieces (by directors they have usually never heard of!) with which they have been—confronted. I am often staggered by the revelation that most of our prospective filmmakers appear to have seen so few films (from any country or period). The major figures of the French New Wave had behind them a passionate interest in and extensive knowledge of, not only Hitchcock, Hawks, Welles, Ford, Ray, Mann, Preminger, etc., but also Mizoguchi, Rossellini, Murnau, Renoir, Ophuls, Dreyer, Bergman, Griffith... you name it. Canadian filmmakers enter the arena to fight their battles severely undernourished. The assumption of our film schools seems to be that you learn to make films by

learning how to use a camera. You don't. And 'learn from' is not synonymous with 'imitate': when Godard made *Breathless* imitating Hollywood, he was defining a relationship to it. Our filmmakers seem *afraid* to learn from Hollywood; as a consequence they imitate it, feebly, all the time.

As for the proponents of a distinctive Canadian culture, they need to take a crash course in Marxism 101, in which they would learn that ultimately everything is dependent upon the economic (hence the political) base, and that the ideological superstructure, while it may influence it in ways not entirely negligible, is powerless to reject its dependency unilaterally. A Canadian culture could distinguish itself only by founding itself in opposition to the United States on the political/economic level, which is to say through the establishment of a distinctively leftist political base. To endorse capitalism today is effectively to endorse the United States, and *vice versa*. There are no signs whatever at present that any such opposition is imminent, in fact quite the reverse:



our governments are moving steadily closer to the American model, the Ontario provincial government is explicitly modelled on it (with Reaganite policies as a key influence), and if the new Alliance party is allowed to win the next federal election there will be no effective distinction. None of the existing political parties can affect this, as all now represent varying shades of the Right: the NDP moderate Right (in so far as it is anything any more), the liberals centre-Right, Alliance crypto-fascist in so far as one can read between the shilly-shallying lines of its present leader. But the rise of a strong, organized anti-capitalist Left in Canada, a Left of vociferous protest, might well have an electrifying effect on our film production, not necessarily in the making of overtly political films, rather in the form of a newfound confidence, a sense of something to fight for, of definitions, distinctions and decisions to be made on every level, theme, form, style, attitude... It would mark the end of low self esteem, and if we all fell down at least we would go down fighting, with a bang instead of a whimper.

The four Canadian films I saw (out of the many screened—I may have made bad choices, but two of the four had strong critical recommendations) were not encouraging. Easily the best

was, in fact, *We All Fall Down* (★★★), the very strong and confident debut film of Martin Cummins who also plays one of the leading roles. One is aware throughout of a presence behind the camera, with intelligent ideas about when to move it, when to cut, and when not to; the acting (aside from an unfortunately over-the-top performance from Helen Shaver in a role that is in any case largely dispensable) is uniformly excellent, Darcy Belsher making a particularly strong impression. The film, however, does not strike me as distinctively Canadian (but I don't hold that against it), nor does it break any new ground: set in Vancouver, the action could be taking place in virtually any North American city, and the theme of drug addiction as a reaction to a despair both personal and general is today universal.

The other two films have both been acclaimed by critics as 'the best Canadian film in the festival'. As I had very much liked Gary Burns' previous movie *Kitchen Party* I had great hopes of *waydowntown* (hovering between ★★ and ★★★). It has the earlier film's liveliness and energy, and its thematic is potentially leftist and explosive: the horrors of the workplace under corporate capitalism, the boredom, cynicism, apathy and rage it breeds. Unfortunately, the film is a textbook

example of the way in which content can be defused and negated by formal and stylistic decisions. With a subject that cries out for the expressive use of decor and environment, the film is shot (on digital video) mainly in full-face closeups, so that what we are invited to respond to are the characters' comic expressions rather than their cause or context; each character is established quickly with his/her particular shtick, which is then repeated (with slight variations) on each reappearance. What might have been a devastating satire is transformed into yet another TV comedy show.

The other critical favourite was the Quebecois *Maelstrom* (★★), by Denis Villeneuve. My long-term friend and colleague V.F. Perkins once remarked to me that his basic demand of a director is 'Don't annoy me. *Maelstrom* annoyed me about once every ten minutes. Extremely clever but without the least manifestation of intelligence, it is slick, facile and maddeningly 'cute', the smug cleverness becoming increasingly distasteful in relation to the subject-matter. The critics are clearly bent upon encouraging Villeneuve to give us more of the same, and he will probably listen to them: a pity, as there is certainly a filmmaking talent discernible if only it could be developed along very different lines.

Iran

Iranian cinema, to judge from this year's examples, seems to be solidifying its claim to being among the most important in the world today. I was unable to see *A Time for Drunken Horses* (very highly regarded by people I trust), but the three films I attended show evidence of new strengths. When I wrote last year about Samira Makhmalbaf's *The Apple* I suggested that the apparent concentration (at least in the Iranian films that get exported) on children might represent a displacement of what couldn't then be treated, the oppression of women. With the recent liberalization of Iranian politics it is precisely this theme that has emerged. *The Day I Became a Woman* (★★★), by Marziyeh Meshkini, from a script by Makhmalbaf with whom she has been closely associated and the participation of his daughter Samira, struck me at times as awkward and somewhat thin in texture, but it has a wonderful freshness and unpredictability in its three-part feminist narrative of childhood (a girl discovering on her ninth birthday that she must no longer play with boys), womanhood (a woman divorced on the spot by her husband for participating in a bicycle race) and age (an old woman at last able to buy all the things she has always wanted, when it is really too late for them to have any practical meaning), the three strands casually drawn together in the closing sequences. *The Circle* (★★★★), by Jafar Panahi (director of *The White Balloon*), honoured with the top prize at the Venice film festival, seems in its national context a shockingly outspoken and defiant assault on the treatment of women in Iran, a true example of Kino-fist. Like Meshkini's film it is also formally audacious, its perspective shifting through the overlapping predicaments of a series of variously harassed and abused women.

Most remarkable, however, is another film of protest, though not in this case woman-centred: *Smell of Camphor, Fragrance of Jasmine* (★★★★, perhaps ★★★★★) by Bahman Farmanara. The project appears on paper fraught with dangers (self-pity, self-righteousness, self-justification), every one of which is swept aside by Farmanara's strength and integrity. The film brings a new dimension to the

self-reflexivity we have previously encountered in the work of Kiarostami and Makhmalbaf: it is a film about the making of itself. Bahman Farmanara plays Bahman Farjami, a film director banned from making films throughout most of his adult life by the Iranian authorities, who is at last (in the present more liberal context) permitted to make one and decides to make it about his own funeral, essentially the tragedy of a wasted life, wasted talent, frustrated energy. Both Farmanara and his film are models of intelligence and dignity, all temptations to self-indulgence rigorously eschewed. One hopes that his premonitions of death prove false and that we shall have many more films by him now that he is allowed to make them: *Smell of Camphor* is, in its generosity of spirit, its controlled rage, its complexities of tone, the work of a major talent.

Asia

I missed the new Oshima film, *Gohatto* a 'buzz' was going around to the effect that *Seance* (Kiyoshi Kurosawa, no relation to *Akira*) was the better of the two, and both were screening at the same time. Obviously I made the wrong choice: *Seance* (★) is of only minimal interest, the kind of 'well-made' film one can find at one's local theatre almost any week of the year, competently acted and directed, with a plot that manages to be at once implausible

and predictable, the kind of anecdotal story one might expect as a half-hour component in some supernatural trilogy (it is in fact a new version of *Seance on a Wet Afternoon*, which I have neither read nor seen in its previous incarnations). The other Japanese film I saw, however, is in an altogether different class. *Eureka* (★★★★) has in fact an even slighter plot and is more than twice as long, yet it sustains its fascination throughout while *Seance* long outstays its welcome. Its secret is partly the establishment of a riveting starting-point (a massacre on a bus, its motive never explained, with only three survivors, the driver and two school-age children), but even more the establishment from the outset of an extremely leisurely, measured pace to which the spectator very quickly adjusts, a matter entirely of tone, rhythm, utterance. Almost four hours long and continuing well past my bedtime, the film engrossed me continuously, all sense of duration suspended. That it develops into a tantalizing mystery story (the bodies of murdered women are found, at first apparently coincidentally, but later also very disturbingly in a town where the trio stop for the night when they take to the road) no doubt helps sustain interest, but its real secret is Shinji Aoyama's stylistic control, the more remarkable for never being obviously showy. My one tentative reservation concerns the

Yi-Yi (A One and a Two)





Yi-Yi (A One and a Two)

film's psychology: I am not entirely convinced that the initial trauma would have the consequences depicted. But the point is clearly arguable and I may be simply wrong. Shot in superb sepia-tinged black-and-white 'scope but melting into vivid colour for its last shot, *Eureka* deserves to be widely known, though its duration seems so far to have deterred distributors, since none nearer than Paris is listed. *Chunhyang* (★★★ Im Kwontaek, South Korea) is on a certain level affecting and impressive. Based on one of those folk legends (one thinks of *Sansho Dayu*) that continue to have resonance wherever oppression exists, elegantly shot in often dazzling colour, it provides many pleasures and satisfactions, not the least of which is the impassioned narration of (the catalogue entry informs me) 'a traditional Pansori singer' who closes the film by exhorting his listeners (now identified with the cinema audience) to rush out and overthrow a social order in which rich oppress poor. Its application to Ontario's present provincial government is irresistible. However, its rage against injustice and in particular the sufferings of women for me repeatedly

evokes Mizoguchi and the comparison is somewhat unfortunate, foregrounding Im's relative obviousness, gaudiness and lack of nuance.

The two films by Taiwanese directors both arrived trailing great acclaim from Cannes. As one of Ang Lee's most fervent admirers I found the already much celebrated *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (★★) a major disappointment, easily Lee's least interesting film so far. I am clearly in a very small minority over this. The ballet-on-wires swordfights over roofs, trees, etc., are very seductive for the first half hour but increasingly tiresome on their endless repetitions; the folk legend here has little of the resonance or contemporary application of *Chunhyang*, and the characters remain mere figures. The real Taiwanese film (Lee must now be considered a cosmopolitan, and his film was shot in Hong Kong), on the other hand, fully deserves its reputation: Edward Yang's *Yi-Yi* (★★★★★). I cannot begin to do it justice after only one viewing and in only limited space. Suffice it to say here that if *mise-en-scene* ever died it is here resurrected, along with the allegedly oldfashioned notion of the film-novel.

Yi-Yi (or 'A One and a Two') has thematic density, rounded characters, a continuously engrossing and highly complex narrative, a great filmmaker's sense of space and significant decor, a combination of fluidity and perfect control; it is funny, surprising, moving. One could not wish away a second of its 173 minutes. Will we be allowed to see it here, in a country that has yet to give a theatrical release to a single film by either Yang or Hou Hsiao-Hsien?

Iceland and Norway

Fridrik Thor Fridriksson has so far made five films, of which the third and fourth are available on either video, DVD or both: *Cold Fever* and *Devil's Island* are edgy comedies with very dark undertones, very distinctive in tone. *Angels of the Universe* (★★★★), more ambitious and qually successful, fully confirms the distinction. I interviewed Fridriksson during the festival; the interview will appear in the next issue, and I shall await that opportunity to discuss Fridriksson's films at greater length. The other Icelandic film I saw, *101 Rekjavik* (★★★), is the debut film of Baltasar Kormakur, a young actor who has shone in at least two of

Fridriksson's films, which it somewhat (as a disturbed and disturbing comedy) resembles. Opening not unlike an American coming-of-age comedy (though from the outset more darkly lit and less concerned to seduce the youth audience), it develops into a fascinatingly intricate study of familial and sexual relations, with the protagonist's mother coming out as lesbian and her son becoming the father of her lover's baby (hence, in a sense, the brother of his own child). Kormakur seems defeated by the necessity to find an ending to this, but until the final five minutes the film is extremely engaging, funny and unnerving.

Hans Petter Moland's previous film *Zero Kelvin* is available on video but has not received anything like the attention it deserves. Startling in its intensity and its uncompromising logic, it can be seen as an intelligent version of *Straw Dogs* that fully confronts the price the protagonist pays for becoming a 'real man', though such an account does not do justice to its journey structure, its man-against-nature theme or its superb location shooting in Norway's far north. Moland's new film *Aberdeen* (★★★★?) repeats the journey structure (this time mainly in Scotland) but is not easy to relate to the earlier work in other respects. In English, with a largely British cast (Lena Headey, Ian Hart and Charlotte Rampling), it has left me wondering whether, in retrospect, it can be seen as fully coherent, though certainly it carries one along irresistibly at the time. Like Fridriksson in *Angels of the Universe* it tackles difficult and complex subject-matter and sustains a tone poised precariously between comedy and melodrama; like *Kelvin* it owes a lot to another magnificent performance by Stellan Skarsgård, surely one of the finest actors in contemporary world cinema.

And, finally, the third of my 'indisputable masterpieces'? Michael Haneke's *Code Inconnu* (★★★★★), a film that appears to have been completely ignored, as formally audacious as *Yi-Yi* is formally conservative. Are people boycotting Haneke now because they were so upset by *Funny Games*? Each of his films represents a challenge to the spectator, and we are so used to being flattered. We like to feel we are being disturbed, up to a

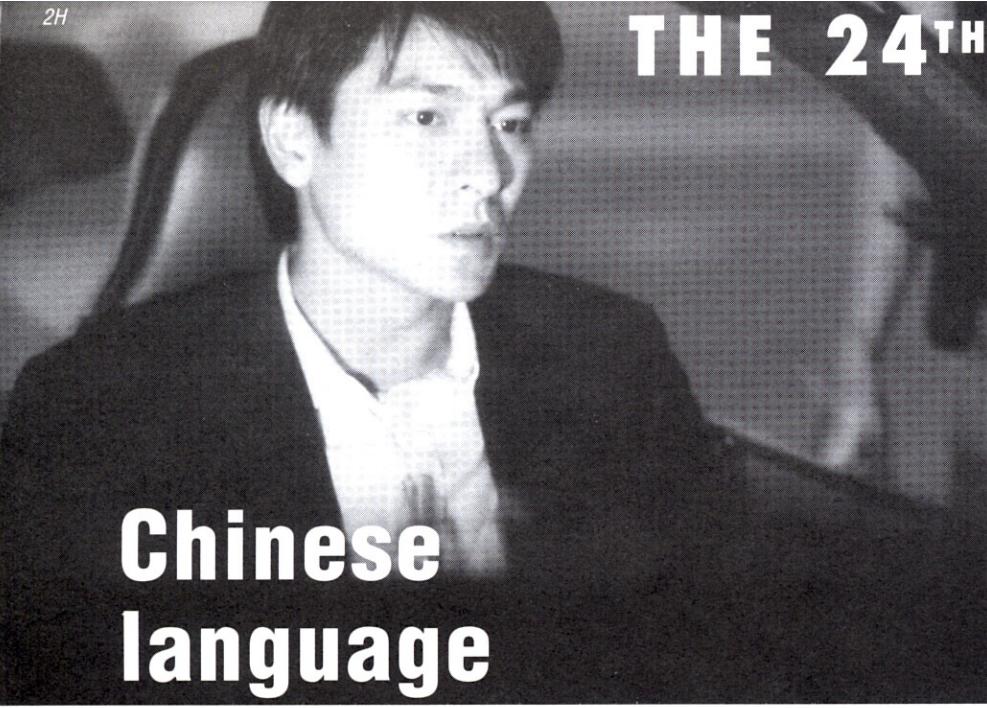
point, but only if we can find the disturbance negated by fashionability or a sense of the 'deliciously sick' (as in David Lynch). Is Haneke perhaps the most intelligently compassionate contemporary moralist? In his work our every action is subjected to scrutiny, yet no one is personally blamed, the blame attaching to the conditions of life under contemporary capitalism. I

am planning a lengthy article on Haneke's work for a future issue; suffice it to say for now that *Code Inconnu* is a work of the greatest virtuosity, while totally free of display or obtrusiveness, difficult, demanding, fascinating; clearly a work that will repay repeated viewings, a work by one of modern cinema's indisputable masters, like him or not.



THE 24TH

HONG KONG IN



Chinese language films

by **Shelly Kraicer**

Perhaps the greatest "cinematographic" experience in Hong Kong is one that's always available, the view from the Kowloon waterfront to Hong Kong Island: a sweep of Causeway Bay, Wanchai and Central's skyscrapers in an extreme long shot, super wide-angle view, with mountains above and the harbour in the foreground. This urban vista, unmatched, in my experience, in its verve, evening dazzle, glamour and viscerally thrilling élan, might have insinuated its character into the Hong Kong cinema experience. For the city's films, with their cinematographic flair — their primary reliance on visuality, on the thrill of the image (rather than narrative structure, or the written quality of a screenplay) — may owe something to this ever-present challenge of the cityscape.

This view can be savoured, perhaps not so coincidentally, just outside of the Hong Kong Film Festival's headquarters, at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre. Among the festivals that I've covered, Hong Kong's is easily the most relaxed, accommodating, and pleasant to navigate and survive. Central venues are conveniently close to each other. As an added bonus, one is "required" to take the 10 minute

Star Ferry ride frequently, as a kind of shuttle between venues in Tsimshatsui (the Cultural Centre, the Science Museum) and those in Central (HK City Hall, the Arts Centre). This provides thrilling panoramas of the harbour and offers sea breezes that serve as a welcome refreshing tonic, recharging one's film-viewing batteries between screenings.

The HKIFF has managed until this year to weather the post-1997 change of regime without major disruption. There are pressures on the programmers, but they existed before 1997 as well. Self-censorship has always been an issue, but the festival's programmers have a distinguished reputation of not shying away from provocative choices of films. In the festival's early years (before 1982), these choices sometimes attracted the unwanted attention of British colonial censorship. And after the beginning of negotiations with the mainland in 1984, the HKIFF was not reluctant, on occasion, to defy pressure from the mainland Chinese Film Bureau. Though this body had other ways of influencing the films to be shown in Hong Kong. This year, for example, Liu Bingjian's *Man Man Woman Woman*, an unauthorised PRC film that deals in

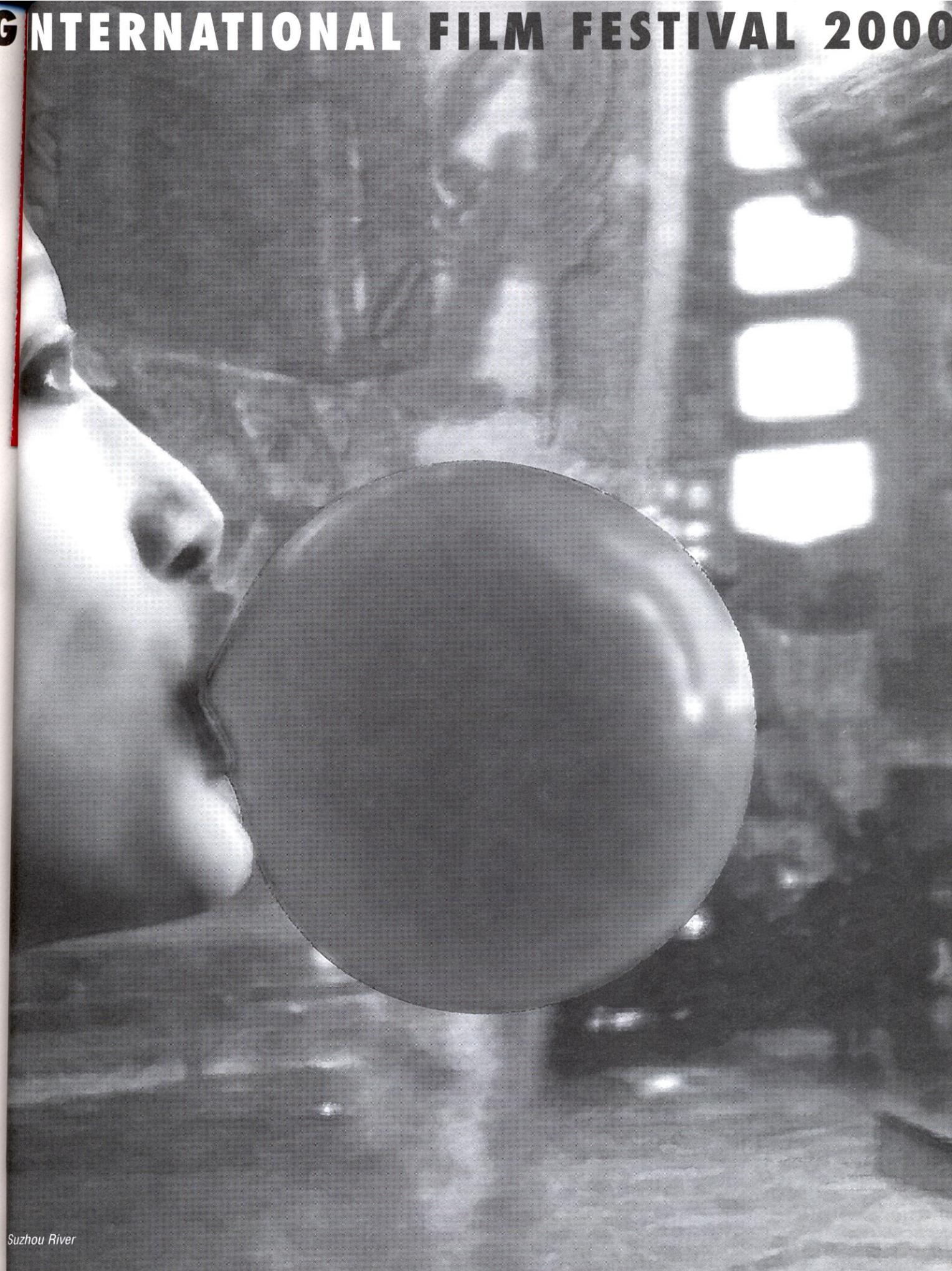
a fanciful and sympathetic way with Beijing's gay subculture, was withdrawn by the director, at the behest of mainland film authorities, shortly before the festival opened.

Rivalled only by South Korea's Pusan film festival, and supported by second-string festivals in Singapore, Taipei, and Tokyo, Hong Kong remains the central annual East Asian film event. Perhaps not for long, if mainland culture authorities have their way. The now biennial Shanghai International Film Festival still has a long way to go, and will not, for obvious reasons, have the programming freedom in the foreseeable future that Hong Kong enjoys today. But as Shanghai vies to re-establish its status as Greater China's film capital, its own festival will have to take on greater and greater importance.

The HKIFF manages to serve several constituencies and fill different needs. For Hong Kongers, it is an essential window to the rest of the world's cinema. Local screens are pretty much restricted to a combination of locally produced films and Hollywood product, leavened with whatever else is trendy at the moment. And at this moment, the trend is East Asia. Films from Japan (especially in horror and action genres), Korea (horror, again) and even a few from Thailand are appearing on Hong Kong screens. The city has one cinema devoted to art house film, the Broadway Cinematheque, with exemplary international programming. The Hong Chance to Die, which the festival chose to highlight as a "closing film", was little more than a grimly violent, increasingly shrill by-the-numbers exercise in gangster genre filmmaking: technically accomplished, but shallow and unmemorable. The Hong Kong Arts Centre supplements this with irregularly screened, well-programmed series of films for the art film crowd. But it is the HKIFF which, once a year, brings the rest of the world's films to a Hong Kong audience.

A second major function of the HKIFF is to filter and select the best of Hong Kong's own film production, and the best films from Chinese speaking countries, and present them to the rest of the world, especially to the more than 100 writers, journalists, scholars, programmers, and film

INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2000



Suzhou River

industry representatives who attend each year from Europe, the Americas, and Asia. Finally, the festival offers a yearly retrospective from the Hong Kong Film Archives, focusing on a particular theme and reviving for local audiences (and foreign guests) local films which might otherwise have been inaccessible for years.

Five films from the festival's Chinese-language offerings stood out this year, and I will discuss them in more detail below. They are: from Hong Kong, Laurence Ah Mon's *Spacked Out*, Stanley Kwan's *The Island Tales*, and Fruit Chan's *Little Cheung*, Li Ying's *2H* from Japan, and from mainland China, Lou Ye's *Suzhou River*. This year's Taiwanese film offerings were a disappointment: aside from Chang Tso-chi's subtle and deeply moving *Darkness and Light* (which I reviewed in CineAction last year, when it screened at the 1999 Toronto International Film Festival), nothing seemed up to the level of that small country's tiny but astonishingly sophisticated national cinema. Chen Yi-wen's *A Chance to Die*, which the festival chose to highlight as a "closing film", was little more than a grimly violent, increasingly shrill by-the-numbers exercise in gangster genre filmmaking: technically accomplished, but shallow and unmemorable.

The Hong Kong Panorama section of the festival was designed to high-

light the best of HK commercial filmmaking from 1999. But, aside from the titles mentioned above, it was curiously weighted towards a new and uninteresting kind of slick action filmmaking that seems to be indebted as much to Hollywood's internationally marketable style as it is to Hong Kong's own rich action cinema heritage. *Gen-X Cops*, *Purple Storm*, and *2000 A.D.* all have in common a relatively high budget and a superficially slick, expensive-equipment exploding, sluggishly plotted mediocrity. All three offer little beyond the reassurance that Hong Kong films driven by an anxiety over Hollywood's increasing local market share will be stillborn at best. Johnnie To's *The Mission* and *Running Out of Time* were both produced by Milky Way Image, Hong Kong's most innovative, creative production company of the last four years. As exercises in genre subversion (gangster film for the former, the cop-and-robber cum buddy film for the latter), as extensions of Hong Kong's post-1997 syndrome filmmaking, as opportunities for some of Hong Kong's best actors to strut their stuff, or as a demonstration that veteran producer director Johnnie To continues to dominate quality commercial filmmaking in the uncertain climate of an end-of-century Hong Kong film industry, these two films comfortably earn their place in the Panorama series.

The "Age of Independents", the

HKIFF's showcase of independently produced Hong Kong film came up with nothing as striking as last year's *Love Will Tear Us Apart*, directed by Nelson Yu Lik-wai (subsequently invited to Cannes) or Lawrence Wong's critically acclaimed *Cross Harbour Tunnel*. A generic tone of urban anomie, a listless narrative drive, and underpowered performances unfortunately marked both Bryan Chang's *Among the Stars* and Alex Lai's *Blue August*, although the latter's interesting play with colour and strong, Wong Kar-wai inspired cinematography herald a promising visual talent.

Hong Kong new wave auteur Stanley Kwan's latest film *The Island Tales* [You shi tiaowu, HK, 1999] is a fascinating shambles, more provocative in its failures than most films are in their limited success. Kwan's speculative fin-de-siecle art film hasn't let go of my imagination, weeks after its screening. The film presents more of a situation than a plot. A consumptive Japanese writer (Takao Osawa), a chic Eurasian American (Michelle Reis), her girlfriend, a Japanese photographer (Kaori Momoi), a narcissistic Hong Kong male movie star (Julian Cheung), a Taiwanese barmaid (Hsu Chi) and a straight female restaurant owner and gay male hotel manager (Elaine Jin and Gordon Liu) are trapped together on fictitious May Fly Island (just off Hong Kong) when an outbreak of a

The Mission



mysterious millennial virus forces the authorities to quarantine the island for 15 hours. Absence of plot is not in itself necessarily a problem. Stanley Kwan's most interesting films have been engaged in a subversive series of attacks on narrative itself, from the complex drama/documentary/behind-the-scenes/restaging/archival footage pastiche of biopic *Centre Stage* (1991) to *Red Rose White Rose* (1994), with its triply mediated, variously unreliable set of narrators and points of view.

The Island Tales poses its own particular sets of problems, though. Let's assume that they are deliberate, or at least functional within a larger scheme, and call them alienation effects. Alienation effect no. 1: most of the characters speak English in the film (the common default language for this group of Japanese, Mandarin, and Cantonese speakers), but the English dialogue is so oddly articulated and heavily accented that much of it is impossible to understand (Chinese viewers who can read the Chinese subtitles have an unfair advantage here). Alienation effect no. 2: the film's rhapsodically efflorescent visual style (kudos to cinematographer Kwan Pun-leung and art director William Chang) verges on the experimental: constantly shifting colour saturation, smeared printing, frantically abrupt jump cutting, and a nervously mobile, subjectively fidgety camera keep the audience off balance. But at the same time, the film holds its viewers with its prodigious offer of a barely digestible stream of gorgeous images that flash by so quickly you wish there were more time to assimilate each one. Alienation effect no. 3: what characterization the cast offers comes off as two dimensional stock-type pose striking: the dope-smoking romantic; the straight-laced control freak; the hyper-self-conscious narcissist. By compressing these character types into a highly charged, tightly constricted and time-compressed stage, though, Kwan manages to jostle his characters until they seem to dance, combining and recombining into surprising juxtapositions (the film's Chinese title translates as "a time for dancing"). *The Island Tales* somehow finds moments when sparks fly, discharging tensions from the abstract network of relationships that it establishes, sparks that

give the film genuine, moving instants of illumination, minor-scale epiphanies. Viewers who can sit through this demanding, sometimes exasperating, sporadically delightful film to the end will gain at least this. When Kwan returns to producing the masterpieces of which he is capable, we will discover what it is in this transitional film that Kwan has learned to discard, and trace the emergence of innovations worth keeping.

Spacked Out [Wu ren jiaoshi, HK, 2000], directed by Lawrence Ah Mon (aka Lau Kwok-cheung) looks like a standard lost-youth genre film. It shows scenes from the lives of four semi-delinquent girls who live in Tuen Mun, a satellite town in Hong Kong's New Territories. They inhabit, on the periphery of school, a marginal but active life revolving around malls, karaoke, drugs, and one night stands. *Spacked Out* doesn't glamourize these



The Island Tales



Spacked Out

wayward young women, though. In this respect, it is a bracing and pointedly critical antidote to the male-centred triad youth films of the late 1990s. The film's style is rough and gritty, with lots of jerky hand-held camera work, seemingly improvised dialogue, episodes of video, and frequent jumpy editing. It oscillates, in a particularly Hong Kong way, between a raw, "honest" seeming neo-realism and heightened, hyper-stylized excursions into the characters' subjectivities (a further examination of this hybrid style is provided below in the section on *Little Cheung*).

The four main characters of *Spacked Out* are all played by first-time actresses, and Lawrence Ah Mon has inspired impressively vivid, spontaneous-seeming performances from all of them, performances that really carry and "sell" the film. Bean Curd (Maggie Poon) is the standout. All blustering tough shaved-headed aggressiveness, she's overly protective of her girlfriend Sissy. The latter is the "femme" of the couple, as well as being an adept at

shoplifting cosmetics while chatting with her friends on a cell phone. Banana, who sells phone sex semi-discreetly during class, wields a savvy but sadly world-wise young sexuality — she's an abortion expert at 16. Cookie is the heart of the film, its narrator, as well as the youngest of the girls. She is introverted, lonely, and lost, and seems to be acutely aware of it. What narrative thread the film exhibits (it is actually a loosely structured series of set pieces) links the gaps in her life, a life in which boyfriends, parents, ambitions, and a sense of self-worth are all notably absent. *Spacked Out* adopts Cookie's first person point of view towards its conclusion in a series of nightmarish, horror-genre derived surrealistic flourishes as she enters or imagines entering an abortion clinic. But director Ah Mon can't completely eschew two episodes of rather heavy-handed lecturing: moralizing about the responsibility of absent parents, and showing a drug trip sequence that seems, in its nightmarish denouement, to be conceived as a sort of public ser-

vice announcement (along the lines of "Kids, don't do drugs, or really bad things will happen"). They feel grafted on, imposed from the outside, and cut against the film's well-earned sense of authenticity. Moreover, they provoke a disquieting concern about the film's agenda vis-a-vis Hong Kong's larger post-1997 political situation. Is the SAR itself also at risk, in so far as it lacks appropriate patriarchal supervision? With the departure of its former colonial masters, and the authority of the new/old parent — the mainland government — constantly in question, just how closely does *Spacked Out* want the audience to identify with the anarchic, free wheeling, subversive energy of its charismatic young heroines?

With a brilliant style and subject, and a nuanced, subtly balanced political subtext, director Fruit Chan's *Little Cheung* [Xi lu xiang, Hong Kong, 1999] was the most impressive Hong Kong film on display at the HKIFF. This film is the final part of Chan's 1997 handover trilogy, following *Made in Hong Kong* (1997) and *The Longest Summer* (1998), though the fact that it has its own sequel, *Durian Durian* [Liu lian piao piao, 2000] complicates matters (I left Hong Kong before *Durian Durian* screened as one of the two closing films, so I am not able to review it here). Set within a few blocks of Portland Street, an extremely dense, Triad-haunted working class Hong Kong neighbourhood of Mongkok, Fruit Chan's little masterpiece tells the story of Little Cheung, a 9-year-old occasional delivery boy at his father's short-order restaurant. In its focus on the family and the surrounding neighbourhood, the film recalls the classic family neo-realist dramas of an earlier Cantonese cinema. It is richly populated with vaguely clownish, slightly menacing triad toughies, wise old coffin makers, former Cantonese opera actors and extras, newspaper vendors, dishwashers, genial and not-so-genial cops: an entire self-contained little world that Chan portrays with dense realism and obvious affection. The wonderful cast, almost entirely made up of non-professional actors, brings all of these characters to vivid, three-dimensional life. But the film's centre has to be nine-year-old prodigy Yiu Yuet-ming, who gives an astonishingly powerful and charismatic performance



Little Cheung

as the slightly goofy, passionate, and impossibly world-wise narrator and title character.

Chan has described *Little Cheung* as a generation-spanning film, its characters balanced between children and the elderly. Little Cheung teams up with Fan, a girl his age who, along with her mother, is an illegal immigrant from China. Fan and her mother surreptitiously wash dishes down the street, behind a restaurant where Fan's father works legally. Little Cheung befriends Fan and offers her extra income as his delivery partner (they split the tips). His strongest relationship is with his grandmother, who seems to divide her time between telling him stories of her past and watching TV with him. In fact, Fruit Chan dedicates his film (in an opening title) to the subject of her viewing: Tang Wing-cheung. Tang, or "Brother Cheung" to his fans, was a real-life former Cantonese opera and movie musical star whose old films seem to play continuously on television. If her stories are to be trusted, Grandma seems to have known personally, co-starred with him in her youth, and perhaps even had an affair with him.

Like all of Chan's work, *Little Cheung* is also a political film. Brother Cheung's death coincides with the 1997 return of Hong Kong to Chinese control: both episodes play significant roles in the film. In a striking sequence, Little Cheung, in school, celebrates the "return to the motherland" with a flag waving mass salute bristling with regimented lines of schoolchildren and rigidly symmetrical camerawork (Chan needs nothing more explicit than this to comment on the HK Special Administrative Region's new political climate). But this scene is tempered with Little Cheung and Fan's rhapsodic bicycle ride along the HK harbour promenade, set against that inescapable Hong Kong skyline, as they fling louder and louder shouts of "Hong Kong is now *ours*" into the harbour. This scene is itself set beside the film's most heart-rending moments, of Fan and fellow mainlanders (who also have no HK residence permits) rounded up and marched into police vehicles prior to deportation back to the mainland.

Chan builds his film out of just such a counter-weighted structure. Scenes recoil from or counter-balance

preceding scenes in a way that invites us constantly to re-evaluate what we have already seen, to rethink it in the context of what is presently unfolding in front of us. Think, for example, of the devastating image of Fan and her fellow child deportees staring out through the bars they are clutching of the police van that carries them away. And contrast this with the film's iconic image of Little Cheung naked from the waist down on the base of a pillar in the middle of the street, standing as punishment for having tried to run away from home. Soaked by rain and urinating, Little Cheung declaims his passionate, rebellious lament, quoting a famous song of Brother Cheung's while molding it into a lyrical defiance of patriarchal authority.

Little Cheung's neo-realism only goes so far. It is a background, a genre touchstone and inspiration off which Chan bounces his freely-spun flights of magical fantasy: passionately conceived scenes that skirt but just avoid sentimentality through their honest, precise detailing. Stylistic references are plural, heterogeneous. Chan will use long takes from fixed cameras through doorways (from a Hou Hsiao-hsien-influenced Taiwanese art cinema); wildly associative montages and variable speed shooting (out of John Woo's urban action cinema); skewed angle photography and dynamically tracking cameras (taking a page from Tsui Hark's film kineticism); Rabelaisian gross-out scenes of the broadest comedy (HK schlock-master Wong Jing's specialty); and adds to them elements all his own. There are moments when the film's extended frame of reference seems to embrace and ratify the whole recent history of Hong Kong cinema, while at the same time re-synthesizing it into a poetic montage that feels utterly fresh, daringly new.

2H (Japan, 1998) is written, directed, shot, edited, and produced by Li Ying. Li was born in China, but has lived in Japan since 1989, and *2H* is his first feature. The film's dialogue is Mandarin Chinese, although the country of production and the setting are Japanese. *2H* combines an irresistible subject with a completely original, attention-getting film style. It manages to be both perfectly concrete and challengingly experimental. The film freely mixes documentary and fiction as it

follows two Chinese Tokyo residents: Ma Jin-san, a 95-year-old former Chinese nationalist army general who has been in exile-cum-retirement in Tokyo since 1949, and Xiong Wen-yun, a middle-aged female Chinese artist who helps to take care of him. Ma's story looks to be completely authentic. The director shoots this difficult, crotchety but well-preserved icon of Chinese history in his apartment. We watch him complain about his care-givers, muse on history, fight with Xiong and his maid, and weaken until he dies. Xiong's sections may be more or less fictional. Li and his camera visit her studio and perhaps even set her up with a male companion, since she wants to have a child. The couple break down in giggles and refuse to go on when Li tries to record them making love. We can never pin down the "truth" status of any given scene. The final fight between Xiong and Ma, which results in the breakdown in their relationship, is so achingly raw and visceral that it has to be one of those instances where documentary crew found themselves in the right place at just the right time.

Li Ying aestheticises his footage by every possible means. Film stock seems to be stretched and distorted in post-processing. Li tints most of the footage: the colour scheme varies from stark black and white, through greenish and greyish monochromes. Li moves his camera fearlessly, getting as close to his subjects as he seems to want the film to get to their souls. He is also fond of capturing his images in ways that distort them to the point of unreadability. We watch Ma's face, in ultra-close up, for what seems like several minutes, reflected off the surface of water in a bowl, before Li pulls back and shows us what it is that we are really seeing.

As Li explained in an interview in the HKIFF newsletter, "the General went through the entire 20th century, including WWI, WWII, the Sino-Japanese War, the civil war and, after moving to Tokyo, the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square. We had to deal with expressing this history. Finally we decided to portray him as a person, a man and a dying man. And he is at the height of his charisma when he was dying". "Perhaps interacting with 'life and death'", says Li, "I

was also interacting with signals of extinction of country, family and personal relationships being sent out by our world at the end of the 20th century. In this sense, I conceive of this film as a fin-de-siecle work for the present century. To realize this sort of interaction with the subject, I tried to break down the 'Berlin Wall' of conventions that stands between fiction and non-fiction in film." Lest this sound too theoretically daunting a basis for a watchable motion picture, Li is always ready to undercut the seriousness of his purpose, as in this exchange he records with Ma:

Ma: I hate that camera. It's like being treated like a criminal./ Li: But it records history / Ma: A real man lives day to day. / Li: But what about history? / Ma: It's all shit. Filming me is just as useless.

2H is at its most powerful near its end, after Ma dies, when it shows Ma's body carried in a funeral procession out of his apartment, down a seemingly interminable series of exterior stairways, followed by a procession of friends or relatives. The camera alternates in front of and behind the procession, as the scene steadily intensifies with the force of a mourning that somehow resolves the director's exasperation with and immense respect for General Ma. Then the film switches from mourning back to Xiong the artist, whose fierce desire to have a child seems to push the tone from mourning towards a sort of dream-play tinted with eroticism. Though it hasn't yet received the kind of festival exposure in the West that it deserves, *2H* was a unanimous jury choice to share the FIPRESCI award at the HKIFF (along with the Thai film *6ixtnin9*).

The other outstanding Chinese language film of the festival was **Suzhou River** [Suzhou He, PRC, 2000], the only entry from mainland China, as it happens. The second film of director and writer Lou Ye, *Suzhou River* premiered at the 1999 Rotterdam Festival and won the prestigious Tiger award. The film resembles a contemporary film noir set in the seediest neighbourhoods of present day Shanghai, along the dirty, post-industrial Suzhou River that seems to wind through nothing but decaying warehouses and dusty factories on its way to Shanghai's waterfront. Although Western critics

have found it easy to tag *Suzhou River* as excessively derivative, under the sway of such diverse influences as Hitchcock and Wong Kar-wai, I find its self-conscious narrative playfulness to be quite innovative. Such a strategy could breath new life into the "sixth generation" of Chinese cinema whose urban grunge-laden reaction against the masters of the "fifth generation" (Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige) seems to have largely played itself out, in the face of official disapproval and bureaucratic resistance. If *Suzhou River* has a key influence, then it might be Wang Shuo, the Beijing based bad-boy novelist. Wang is a self-proclaimed "hooligan" writer whose irreverent, sarcastic novels and stories put the conventions of narrative itself into question. And like *Suzhou River*, they often deal with shady, marginal film-noirish characters, and they play destabilizingly within genres.

Suzhou River has two narrators. Or three. Or more. It's hard to tell. The framing story involves a videographer, unnamed, in love with mermaid-costumed bar-dancer Meimei (Zhou Xun). He starts as the narrator, and his point of view is ours (via a subjective camera) for much of the film. Meimei (narrator 2) tells him the story that Mardar (narrator 3), a man who has become obsessed with her, told her. In Mardar's story, he is a motorcycle courier who has fallen in love with Moudan (also played by Zhou Xun), the young daughter of his boss. Complex gang machinations force Mardar to kidnap Moudan for ransom, after they have fallen in love. Moudan, distraught, escapes and throws herself into the Suzhou River. Mardar, released from prison, searches for Moudan, finds Meimei instead, and becomes convinced that they are the same person. At which point the videographer/narrator abdicates his story telling role, handing it over to Mardar. But the identity of the narrator, once destabilized, never settles down, and begins to alternate, mixing both men's points of view. Mardar finally thinks he finds Moudan in a 24 hour shop. Meimei leaves the videographer with the following question, after both believe that they see Mardar and Moudan's bodies, retrieved from the river: "If I leave you someday, would you look for me, like Mardar looking for Moudan?"

With its fractured, dissolving, indeterminate and unreliable narrators and a narrative marked by self-reflexive, mise-en-abime, *Suzhou River* deflates even the possibility of a stable subject, of a singular, reliable point-of-view, right from its opening river-boat montage. As highly fractured as the narrative is, though, the film's style, despite its being rife with jump cuts, alternations between film and video, and steady-cam restlessness, imposes kind of unity on the text that is quite sneakily deceptive. The colours are lush, rather than film-noir obscure, saturated with evening yellows and reds, shabby industrial browns and a heightened, eerie night-club light effect. The music, too, is lushly orchestrated. And performances are top-notch, especially Zhou Xun's in the double female role. She takes a potentially stereotypical female role, running the (non-) gamut from naive schoolgirl to dangerous seductress, and infuses it with a mature, substantial presence that manages to insist that there is something "there", above and beyond the object of a (multiply-conceived) voyeur's gaze. Happily, *Suzhou River* has been picked up for North American release (cheers to Strand Releasing), so its provocations and mysteries need not remain the preserve of a fortunate festival-going audience.

The Hong Kong film world is small and well-organized enough to have set up several events to run concurrently with the Festival, the cumulative effect of which was to give a rich, multi-dimensional snapshot of the current state of Chinese cinema. In the middle of the festival, on April 16, 2000, the 19th annual Hong Kong Film Awards were presented at the Hung Hom Coliseum and live on Hong Kong TV. This glitzy, though far less tacky, local version of Hollywood's Academy Awards show moved quickly, featured a liberal helping of Hong Kong cinema's movie stars and pop idols. Exceptionally this year, the show was noticeably pan-Asian, even international in its presenters. Among those onstage handing out awards were Wim Wenders, the 2000 HKIFF's special guest, and directors from Thailand, Korea, and Japan, as well as mainland China and Taiwan. The awards ceremony was marked by a spirit of community that was palpable and that felt



quite genuine. As soon as the TV cameras were done, the audience was free to come down to the stage and mingle with the award winners, movie stars, and TV hosts (and festival guests, who were given tickets to the show, eagerly took the opportunity to join in). It was even possible to hop on the buses that took the film people to the post-awards banquet, and bump into best actress award-winner Helen Law Lan, Time Magazine scribe and Chinese cinema booster Richard Corliss, and film historian extraordinaire David Bordwell, all on the way to a friendly gala feast courtesy of the HK Film Awards Association. It would be difficult to imagine this kind of comfortable feeling of community between, say, the people of Los Angeles and the Oscar awards glamorati.

At the opposite, somewhat more formal end of the film appreciation spectrum, Hong Kong Baptist University hosted the 2nd International Conference on Chinese Cinema from April 19th to 21st, in conjunction with the HKIFF. A distinguished lineup of Chinese cinema scholars from around the world, featuring Esther Yau, Ni Zhen, Chris Berry, Sheldon Lu, and Stephen Teo, gave



papers in Chinese and English that centred around the theme of "History, technology and future of transnational Chinese film and television".

All three concurrent events thus shared a similar theme: Hong Kong cinema's place in the world is undergoing a significant reconceptualization, both commercially and conceptually. And its pan-Asian setting might

become the key feature of its future development. The retrospective series of the Festival, this year titled "Border crossings in Hong Kong cinema" reinforced this new conception, with its emphasis on 1950s and 1960s collaborations between Thai, Philippine, Japanese, Korean and, Hong Kong cinemas. Law Kar, who programmed the retrospective, argues that Hong Kong's



film industry once thrived by forging links beyond the borders of China itself. He suggests that the current era of pan-Asian and European/American co-production and joint financing of Hong Kong-conceived films has sparked another, in some ways parallel, rejuvenation of the local industry.

With sessions titled "Rethinking and unthinking 'Chineseness' in transnational Chinese media", "Hong Kong cinema in the global context", "Women and queer", and "Hong Kong cinema and global cultural politics" the conference offered a state-of-the-field survey of Chinese cinema studies' current preoccupations: the globalisation of cultural space and the usefulness of the "transnational" — the inescapable buzzword in the field — as an organizing principle and analytical tool.

David Bordwell's provocative keynote address "Transcultural spaces: Chinese cinema as world film" confronted these issues directly with the thesis that certain characteristic features that have defined Chinese cinemas of the 1980s and 1990s can directly be connected to key practices of both Hollywood film and European art-cinema. Correspondences can flow from direct influence (e.g. that of Hollywood's "intensified continuity" of the 1980s), but also from common solutions to common problems (editing, camera placement, and staging enforced by "planimetric" compositions), and from innate features of the medium itself (a fixed playing space that shapes composition in depth). Bordwell characteristically grounds his

analysis in a close reading of the films' mise-en-scene and editing practices. He finds that the exigencies of craft, stylistic conventions that enable efficient production, and common consequences that flow from a "commitment to certain aesthetic and economic choices" result in what he calls "transcultural stylistic affinities", legible to widely differing film audiences, that show "how films can cross boundaries of both nations and culture".

More controversially, a debate arose at the conference around the clash between approaches to the field by "insiders" (i.e. practitioners of Chinese culture) and "outsiders" (read adepts of Western film theory and practice). But this can all too easily collapse into a sterile polemic that reduces complex nuanced critical positions that actually engage with films to challenges based on superficial "identity politics" labelling. An interesting echo of that debate resurfaced in the HKIFF newsletter, which took up the vexed term "fanboy". Two columns in Festival News, published during the HKIFF, attempted to grapple with a certain kind of overseas (largely North American) enthusiast of Hong Kong film, out in force at the festival, whose interest in actors, offbeat genres, and whose attachment to certain Hong Kong cinematic pleasures can be considerably at variance with those of local critics and audiences. Evoking but ultimately rejecting a Chinese insider's suspicion of an outsider's voyeuristic, orientalizing gaze, the festival organisers, writers, and staff succeeded in creating a relaxed, open,

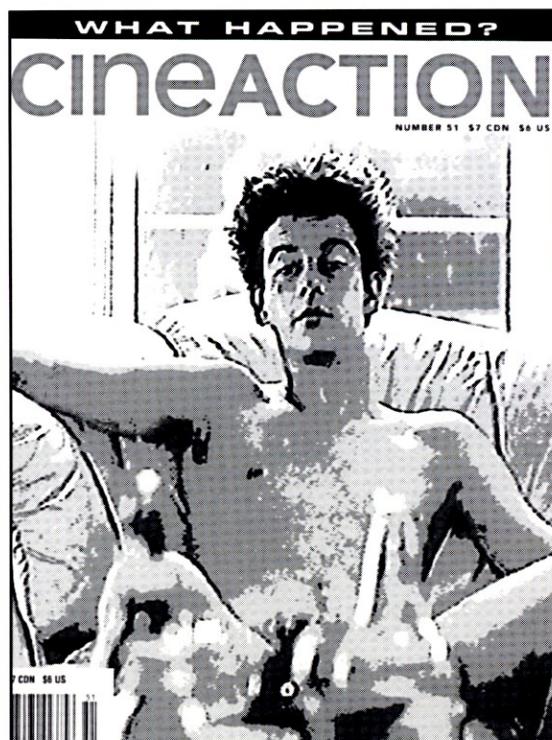
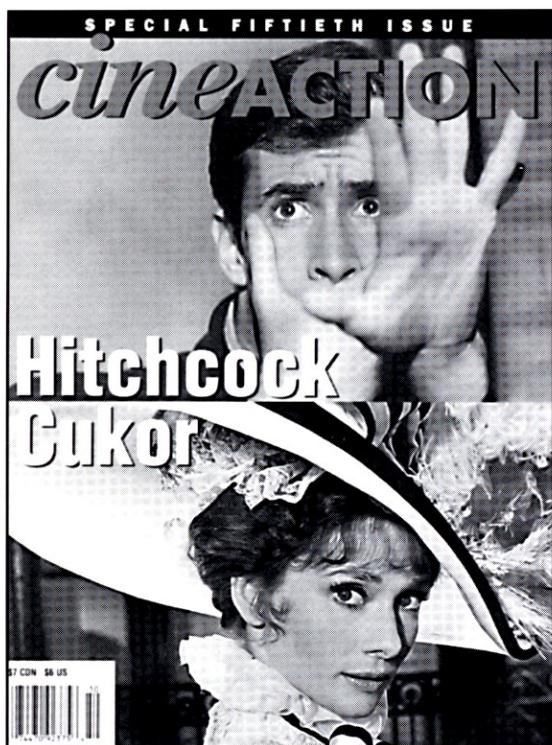
generously welcoming atmosphere for its foreign visitors that puts many more "prestigious" festivals to shame.

After returning to Toronto, I learned that the future of the HKIFF is not at all assured. Following the Hong Kong government's dissolution of the democratically elected Hong Kong Urban Council in 1997 (which, since 1994, had sometimes managed to buffer the festival from political/bureaucratic attempts to influence its programming), the HKIFF's quality, preeminent rank in Asia, and even its very survival has been put at risk by its new overseer, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. The imposition by that body of severe budget cuts and of a new bureaucratic administration finally provoked the HKIFF's highly respected programming and editorial staff (including international programmer Li Cheuk-to and Asian film programmer Jacob Wong) to resign en masse, after the festival's close in April. One can only hope that the Hong Kong SAR government will not fail to realize that in jeopardizing the HK SAR's most prominent outward-looking cultural institution, it threatens to weaken Hong Kong's reputation as a sophisticated, cosmopolitan centre, and undermine its image as a city that continues to have a vital role to play in the world.

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